40TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

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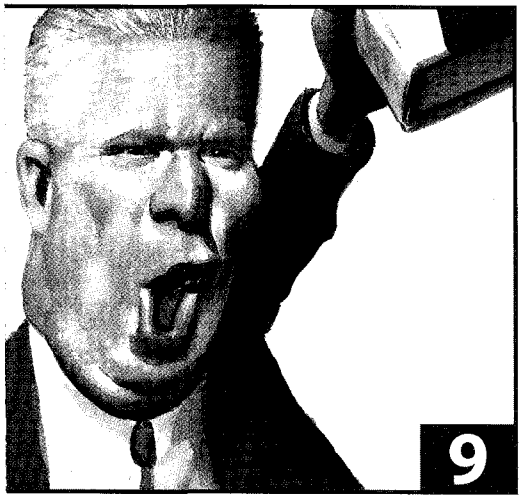

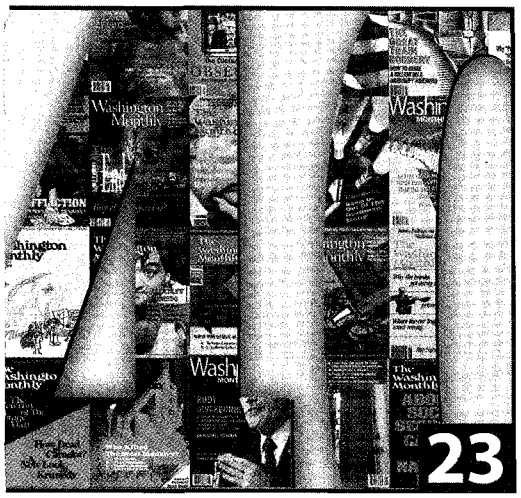

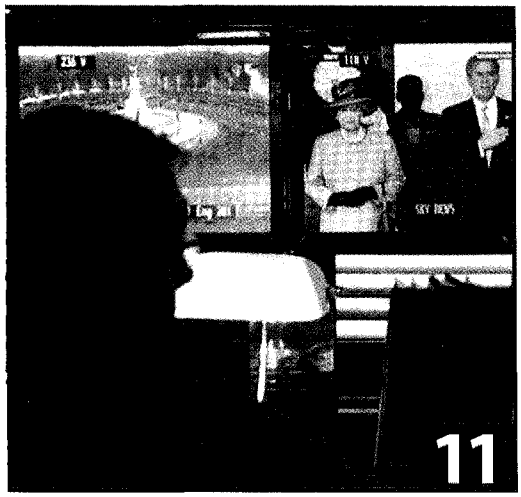

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Editor's Note

PAUL GLASTRIS

Our Patented Early-Warning System

When I worked at *U.S. News & World Report*, we had an editor, a world-weary veteran of *Time*, who liked to tell the following story. In 1979, he said, *Time* ran a cover story on cocaine, then a hip, growing but still fringe phenomenon. That issue of the magazine turned out to be one of the worst-selling in *Time*'s history. Two years later, when coke had spread to the American mainstream and was wreaking all kinds of havoc, *Time* published another cover story on cocaine. That issue became one of the magazine's all-time bestsellers. The lesson, he said, was that it is dangerous to get too far ahead of the news; what readers really want is sense made of the news they've already heard about.

I thought of this editor's story as we were putting together the current issue of the *Washington Monthly*, which celebrates the magazine's fortieth anniversary. Flipping through stacks of yellowing old issues, looking for great pieces that would make engaging reading today (the excerpts begin on page 26), I was struck by how often the magazine did precisely the opposite of what my *U.S. News* editor recommended. The *Monthly* has long made a habit of publishing stories that were months or even years ahead of the news, usually for the purpose of sounding alarms about unrecognized problems—alarms which often turned out to be well worth heeding.

A few examples: In 1980, Gregg Easterbrook wrote a cover story explaining that the space shuttle, then under construction, had so many problems—especially its solid rocket boosters and heat-shielding tiles—that it risked being destroyed in flight. Which, alas, happened in 1986 and then again in 2003, for precisely the reasons Easterbrook foresaw. In March of 2003, Nicholas Confessore predicted, rightly, that the imminent U.S. invasion of Iraq would undermine the readiness of our already-overstretched all-volunteer army and lead to falling reenlistments and crushingly burdensome redeployments. A year later, Benjamin Wallace-Wells looked at the supercharged real estate market, the Fed's loose money policy, and Alan Greenspan's odd pronouncements about the splendors of adjustable rate mortgages, and predicted that the housing bubble "is likely to burst, and when it does it may very well take the American economy down with it." Those are just three of the many, many stories the magazine called right (there are a number we called wrong, too; you can see a collection of both sprinkled among the excerpts in this issue).

So what is the secret to our prescience? Part of it is frequency of publication: when you're putting out a monthly (now bimonthly) magazine it's nearly impossible to be on the news, so you have to learn to be ahead of it. Part of it is the blessing, as it were, of having a relatively small, already-well-informed readership that is looking for something beyond the daily headlines. But more than anything, it is a consequence of the unique mission founder Charlie Peters set out for the magazine, a mission Nicholas Lemann reassesses in this issue (page 24). Charlie wanted the magazine to scrutinize the performance of government with fierce honesty but also with the intent of making it work better. Where the traditional investigative reporter probes government agencies and programs looking for illegality, the classic *Monthly* writer looks for bureaucratic weaknesses and policy mistakes which, if left unattended, could lead to disaster. It is the opportunity to do this kind of thinking-man's reporting that has lured so much great young talent to the *Monthly* over the years. These journalists have typically gone on to positions of prominence at more mainstream publications, bringing some of the *Washington Monthly* sensibility with them.

Today, that mainstream press is suffering a drastic downsizing. As a result, there are fewer and fewer reporters covering government, even as government itself is growing in size and reach. While we can pray that our current political leaders are skillful enough to manage this expansion deftly, their ability to do so would be greatly enhanced if there were enough journalists out there on the front lines providing early warnings of trouble in time for adjustments to be made.

The big debate in journalistic circles right now is whether bloggers and smaller niche publications can fulfill some of the watchdog role that the traditional news organizations are abandoning. The answer is not at all clear, but the *Monthly*'s forty-year track record provides some clues. Yes, large media companies with big mass audiences have advantages. But a smaller audience can bring with it freedom from pressure to follow the herd. Yes, a lot of bloggers are young and amateurish. But most *Monthly* writers have been young and relatively inexperienced, too. Easterbrook, Confessore, and Wallace-Wells were twenty-nine, twenty-six, and twenty-five, respectively, when they broke their big stories, and none had written on those subjects before.

What the journalistic landscape will look like in coming years is anyone's guess. What's clear is that the model of journalism pioneered by the *Washington Monthly* is more relevant and more needed than ever. WM

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BACK TO SCHOOL

I read your new college rankings with absolute delight, and not just because the place I'm privileged to teach (the University of California, Berkeley) ranks number one. More importantly, it's because your ranking system uses criteria that are essential to higher education in today's world—the extent to which all talented young people gain admission regardless of family income, cutting-edge research by faculty, and encouragement of students to give back to society. May the *Monthly*'s ranking system become the dominant guide for all college choices in the future!

Robert B. Reich
Former Secretary of Labor
Professor of Public Policy, University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, Calif.

By focusing on research and PhDs to determine social contributions, you rather seriously distort the rankings of liberal arts colleges—some really wonderful, social-mobility-promoting schools like Pitzer and Warren Wilson are way down in the rankings. I'd look again at the weighting system. And another small ax to grind: my own institution, forbidden by the State of Washington to grant PhDs, disappears from your rankings entirely. We do a lot, however, in your other two categories.

Helena Meyer-Knapp
Professor Emeritus, Evergreen State College
Olympia, Wash.

Your college ranking are a refreshing change, but shouldn't some of the categories be given as a ratio of the student population? For instance, "Research expenditure" at Cal Tech (2,100 students, $270 million) may be smaller than at MIT (10,200 students, $601 million), but it is distributed to a much smaller student population. Thus, each Cal Tech student gets the equivalent of $128,000, while a MIT student is limited to only $59,000.

James Wellnut
Via e-mail

The editors reply:
Ms. Meyer-Knapp and Mr. Wellnut both have reasonable complaints about how our rankings system treats research-oriented institutions. But if large research institutions tend to do better in our rankings than those that are smaller or less research oriented, that's because we think they should. Unlike, say, humanities departments, the facility- and technology-driven nature of lab work means that larger research institutions can deliver societal benefits above and beyond those reflected in research expenditures per student. While smaller research-oriented schools certainly do fantastic work—and Cal Tech does pretty well on our list, too—larger institutions provide more bang for the buck.

THE ROOTS OF FAILURE

Camille Esch's interesting article on community college remedial classes ["Higher Ed's Bermuda Triangle," September/October 2009] is like trying to saddle the proverbial horse after it has escaped the barn. I would welcome a corresponding article addressing the proximate cause of the problems: the scandalous pre-college undereducation of so many of the matriculating students. And why assume that college education is the Holy Grail to be pursued by everyone?

E. Douglas Bolick
Newburyport, Mass.

Camille Esch replies:
True enough: the problem of college remediation has its roots in dysfunctional high schools that don't prepare students for college, or anything else, for that matter. But high school educators can similarly point to elementary schools, and elementary educators can in turn blame parents for their educational failures. We live in an unequal society, and alas, public education is for educating the public we have, not the public we wish we had. The task for any public school is to figure out the best way to handle the students they have right now. A college degree should not be considered the Holy Grail for everyone, but all signs point to the need for more people to obtain some kind of postsecondary education. Despite big increases in college-going rates, wage premiums for graduates are at all-time highs. Obtaining a higher education is good for students, and for the rest of us too.

MISSION CRITICAL

While I am impressed with Peter Bergen's knowledge of Afghanistan, in his long article in your July/August issue ["Winning the Good War"] he fails to address the core questions about the war: Why are we fighting the Taliban? There are crucial differences between the goals of al-Qaeda and the Taliban, so why are we treating them the same? Why do we have 70,000 combat troops, plus private mercenaries, there? How many more will be needed? What will it ultimately cost? What is the exit strategy?

Bergen suggests the U.S. must not only reform the Afghanistan army and government, but also provide long-term "stability and prosperity" so it "will never again be a launching pad" for terrorism. Does this apply as well to the many weak and failed nations around the world which potentially could be launching pads for terrorism? Do we invade and rebuild them all? Can we afford the luxury of fighting expensive wars wherever terrorism might arise?

Guy T. Saperstein
Piedmont, Calif.

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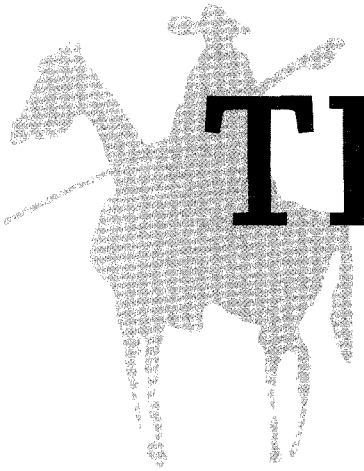

TILTING *at windmills*

By Charles Peters

In good hands

As we celebrate the *Monthly*'s forty years, I want to express my gratitude to my successor, Paul Glastris, for the job he has done guiding the magazine during the last eight years. He has demonstrated two gifts that are essential for an editor: a knack for picking talented people to do the reporting and for helping them produce articles that not only illuminate important issues but, when necessary, inspire people to reexamine their assumptions. The only serious disagreement we have had was on the Iraq War, which Paul originally favored and I opposed. And even there, I admired the intense patriotism behind his stand. From the moment we met, when he came to our conference on neoliberalism in 1983 as a very young man, I sensed something special in Paul. Now, after twenty-six years of friendship and working together, I am sure of it.

Oblivious youth

By now, practically everyone agrees that the Obama administration misread history in thinking that the lesson to be learned from the failure of Clinton's health care bill was not to create its own bill. The reason the Clinton plan failed was not because it originated in the White House but because it was too complicated to explain.

The greatest casualty of Obama's failure to introduce his own bill in order to make clear from the beginning the specifics of his program has been the loss of support among senior citizens. Numerous early reports that "savings would come from Medicare" and the lack of information—or the misinformation—about the various bills have combined to make seniors anxious. Even my wife, a certifiable Obamaniac, has fretted about what's going to happen to her Medicare. And polls show a dangerous loss of support for health care reform from older Americans. The White House was insensitive to this danger for far too long, perhaps because there's not a single prominent graybeard on the White House staff.

> I dream of seeing an uprising against all the generals and politicians who blithely offer more soldiers to the meat grinder of their third, fourth, or fifth combat tours.

The Ivy obsession

One of the most depressing trends over the last few decades has been the increasing tendency to deem an Ivy League education as essential to success and the resulting desperate pressure parents exert on their children, even preschoolers, to do everything necessary to gain admission to one of these institutions. I am therefore delighted to see a column by the *Washington Post*'s Jay Mathews listing individual after individual in field after field who has achieved conspicuous success without an Ivy League degree.

The alumni of this magazine are well known for doing well in their subsequent careers. Many of them are Ivies, but many others are not. Here are some of the colleges the latter group attended: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Augustana College, Occidental College, University of Michigan, Colorado College, Northwestern University, Johns Hopkins University, Marymount College, Vanderbilt University, Boston University, University of the South, Bowdoin College, and the United States Naval Academy. Among the publications that chose to employ the non-Ivy *Monthly* alumni: the *New Yorker*, *Time*, the *Washington Post*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *U.S. News & World Report*, *Slate*, and *Harper's*. Two went on to the *New Republic*; two others are now at the *New York Times*, and one is the editor of *Newsweek*. Of our two Pulitzer winners, one, Kate Boo, is an Ivy. But Taylor Branch attended North Carolina—on a football scholarship.

Yale's New Haven line not selling as well, for some reason

I have long suspected that snobbery rather than educational merit motivates much of the obsession with the Ivy

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League. Confirmation of my suspicion was recently provided by Harvard University, which has agreed to endorse a line of preppy clothing. It will appear in February under the name Harvard Yard.

Policy by Obama, execution by Kafka

My wife recently received a letter from a friend who had been trying to get her mortgage modified under the Obama administration program to help those threatened with foreclosure. After five attempts to submit her information to the mortgage servicer she finally received an acknowledgment that her material had been received and it would take forty-five to sixty days to process. Then the great day arrived. Her application was approved! The only catch was that her monthly payment remained the same. When my wife's friend called to protest she was told a mistake had been made but, alas, she would still have to resubmit all her paperwork. When she had done just that, she was told the time limit had expired!

I found the story hard to believe, even though my wife swore her friend is a totally credible person—but then I found a story headlined "Judges' Frustration Grows With Mortgage Servicers" by John Collins Rudolf in the *New York Times*. The judge was frustrated by Wells Fargo's failure to respond to a woman after she had submitted the necessary paperwork three times. "Each time she called to check on the request," reports the *Times*, "she was told to send her paperwork again."

So the friend's story is not unusual. Indeed, according to the judge, this kind of story is one "that other bankruptcy judges are hearing over and over again." Obama should expose banks like Wells Fargo that we bailed out when they were in trouble, but now drag their feet on helping those of us who need a break. And Congress should stop caving in to the lobbyists and give bankruptcy judges the right to modify mortgage debt just as they can other debt.

> My suspicion that snobbery motivates much of the obsession with the Ivy League was confirmed recently, when Harvard agreed to endorse a line of preppy clothing.

Neocons and neolibs: Why they differ

Although I've been called the godfather of neoliberalism, I was always fond of Irving Kristol, the godfather of neoconservatism, who died recently. We had many things in common. In the 1940s, we even lived within a block or two of each other on the West Side of New York City. More significantly, we both became critics of conventional liberalism. The difference between us was that seeing what was wrong with liberalism made him into a conservative, while I wanted to use the criticism to make liberalism better.

Over the years, I have speculated about what explained the different conclusions we had reached. One experience stands out. We had served in the Army during World War II, but what happened to me strengthened my belief in democracy while his experience produced the opposite result. He suffered abuse from most of his fellow soldiers because he was a Jew. I, on the other hand, found myself not only liking but also respecting most of the men I was thrown together with. Bad apples existed, but they were a minority. Once, when one of them stole my fountain pen, fifteen one-dollar bills (which more than represented its value) were deposited on my bunk by the soldiers who shared my hut. And, incredibly, when I occupied a hospital room with a white Alabama farmer and a black Mississippi farmer we not only got along, we had a lot of fun. I'm sure chance played a part in making our experiences so different, but given what happened it's not hard to understand how the liberalism of Charlie Peters and the conservatism of Irving Kristol came to be.

The Office of Personnel Management Management

If you were looking for expertise in the realm of government personnel, you would think the Office of Personnel Management would be the place to find it. But according to the *Washington Post*'s Joe Davidson, it seems the OPM is looking to contract outside experts to "provide comprehensive staffing and placement services covering a variety of occupations/series/grade levels . . . in both the competitive and excepted services." If OPM employees don't provide these services, what do they do?

The greediest generation

In the neoliberal manifesto published here in May 1983, I worried about the tendency of liberals to "pull up the ladder," a syndrome perfectly captured by the title of the British film *I'm All Right Jack*, meaning I've got mine so I don't care if you get yours. For the American labor movement, it meant wage and benefit packages that in some cases were so generous that they threatened a company's prospects for future growth, sometimes even its survival, and thus its ability to hire new workers. The ladder had been pulled up.

I see a similar syndrome in today's seniors. They have their Medicare and they are so desperate to keep it untouchable that they have stopped caring what happens to people who don't have health insurance. I've criticized the Obama administration for its failure to foresee this problem, but the seniors themselves deserve blame. For instance, even sensible senators like Florida's Bill Nelson have been pressured by older constituents into supporting the program known as Medicare Advantage, which provides a

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few additional benefits to some of its participants but is mainly a source of a huge and wasteful government subsidy to insurance companies.

What would we ever need brakes for?

A front-page story in the *Wall Street Journal* reports that revenue-starved states are slashing services. The *Washington Post* reports an example from the District of Columbia, which ended its safety inspection of most private cars on October 1. The move will save $400,000 a year, but cars will no longer be checked for eighty-one defects, including broken head- and taillights, worn-out brakes, and treadless tires.

It seems to me that the city has failed to make an important distinction. Cars of recent vintage may not need inspection, but how about all the clunkers that didn't get traded in—such as cars driven for 100,000 miles? And shouldn't brakes and tires be checked after 30,000?

Terror at zero feet

It was nearly eleven years ago that planeloads of Northwest Airlines passengers were left stranded on the tarmac for as long as nine hours at the Detroit airport. In 2006, another planeload, this time of American Airlines passengers, found itself marooned at the Austin, Texas, airport for more than nine hours. In 2007, JetBlue passengers were left alone on their plane for eleven hours during an ice storm.

"Through July this year," reports Scott McCartney of the *Wall Street Journal*, "777 flights were stuck sitting for three hours or more."

So what has the FAA done about the problem? The answer is nothing. In late September of this year, there was a conference to discuss possible solutions to the problem. Nothing better illustrates the spinelessness of the FAA.

But if you want another example, consider the recent crash of a private plane and a helicopter over the Hudson River. There have been scores of near misses in recent years in the airspace surrounding Manhattan. But the only action taken by the FAA was to limit flights over the East River, and that step was taken only after a private plane smashed into an Upper East Side apartment building.

The problem with the Federal Aviation Administration, which I pray Obama and Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood will confront, is that it constantly caves before pressure from the airlines and the private pilots because of their influence over the congressional committees that oversee it and provide its funding. The media must also play a role in exposing the danger in public safety by this three-corner relationship between the lobbyists, Congress, and FAA bureaucrats.

> For too long, the White House was insensitive to seniors' concerns about what health care reform would mean for Medicare, perhaps because there's not a single prominent graybeard on the White House staff.

Smokejumpers on the Potomac

The U.S. Forest Service has awarded $2.8 million in forest-fire-fighting money to Washington, D.C., reports Stephen Dinan of the *Washington Times*. To be sure, we probably have more trees than most other cities, but the fact remains that Washington is a very humid place, much of it having been built over a swamp. You would think that bone-dry areas like Southern California need that $2.8 million a lot more than we do.

A donut hole filled with drug-industry pork

I smelled a rat when Obama proudly announced in June that the drug industry had agreed to help Medicare patients fill the donut hole between the $2,700 ceiling that currently exists on the cost of drugs subsidized by Medicare and $6,153, which is now the threshold at which the subsidy kicks in again. The rat turned out to be that, in return for that concession, Obama had agreed not to have Medicare bargain for drug price reduction as the Veterans Administration has done at such great savings to the taxpayer.

Now it appears there is still another rat. According to a Congressional Budget Office study reported by Duff Wilson of the *New York Times*, the "concession" would end up costing Medicare an additional $17.4 billion over ten years. The reason is that plugging the donut hole will keep seniors on brand-name drugs instead of encouraging them to switch to generics when the $2,700 is reached. Now they'll still be buying the brand names when they reach the other side of the hole. And when they get there, the subsidy rises to 95 percent, which means more costs to Medicare and more profit for the drug industry.

First Amendment, Inc.

In the case just argued in the Supreme Court involving a corporate-sponsored film attacking Hillary Clinton, the issue is whether a corporation enjoys the right of free speech. The argument that it does have such a right is based on the concept that the corporation is a "person," which it clearly is not. This absurd concept found its way into the law with the 1886 Supreme Court decision in *Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad Company*. Since then, corporations have tried to expand the reasonable point that corporations should have some rights enjoyed by an individual—to sue and be sued, for example—to justify rights like a corporate right to free-

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dom of speech that make no sense at all. A constitutional scholar, Garrett Epps, who attended the recent Supreme Court hearings, tells me that John Roberts and Antonin Scalia actually seemed to feel that the corporation enjoys more rights than the individual.

K Street blues

We have seen the power of industry lobbyists demonstrated again and again in the last year not just on mortgage reform, but on health reform and airline safety. It also threatens any real reform of the regulation of Wall Street.

The power of lobbyists over Congress has grown dramatically during my forty-eight years in Washington. What's happened is, the reforms made during the Kennedy-Johnson administration and by Democratic Congresses in the early years of the Nixon administration frightened the nation's big shots. In the 1970s, they moved their trade associations to Washington, hired lobbyists, and brought about an explosion of new office buildings on the K Street–Connecticut Avenue axis. The number of outright lobbyists and the number of lawyers, who are mainly lobbyists, has also exploded. And as we all now know, they learned a great secret—that they could do indirectly through campaign contributions what they could not do with outright direct payments to officials.

Officials who would never dream of accepting an outright bribe will gratefully accept campaign contributions and, consciously or unconsciously, be influenced by the access provided to those who do the contributing or arrange it. This, I fear—along with the manipulation of congressional districts to provide safe seats, which has left the Republican Party prisoner to its deranged extreme right wing—accounts for much of the tough going reform has faced this year. Another factor that cannot be overstated is the increasing sophistication corporations have displayed in the selection of individuals to do the lobbying. They hire people like Tom Daschle, who are regarded with respect and affection by those they are hired to influence. If you're an official, you often find that they're your pals. They live next door and their kids play with your kids. They often have similar views on public issues. Some have even fought as your comrades in the same political battles. All this is what makes them so seductive, their advice so hard to resist even when you should know better.

> But the seniors themselves deserve blame—too many of them are so desperate to keep their Medicare untouchable that they have stopped caring what happens to the uninsured.

Intelligence made to order

Suspicions that most of us have had about the CIA under George W. Bush are confirmed by a recent study by the Brookings Institution. It finds that analysts at the CIA were rewarded for having their reports included in the President's Daily Brief and that their findings were more likely to make it into the brief if they were perceived to be of the sort that attracted presidential interest, meaning in Bush's case items like "evidence" that Iraq had WMDs. One carefully worded Brookings conclusion, as reported by Walter Pincus of the *Washington Post*: "Focusing on producing PDB items that would draw favorable comment from Bush could have skewed 'topic selection and treatment in the analytic community.'" Translated from Brookingspeak, this means they gave Bush what he wanted to hear.

The revolt against the generals

I am getting fed up with the generals and politicians who urge committing large numbers of new troops to Afghanistan. Generals don't get killed, neither do politicians. But thousands of soldiers have lost their lives and many thousands more have suffered terrible wounds in Iraq or Afghanistan. There is a fact that I have stated several times in this column to little effect, but when I state it to strangers they are astonished. That fact is this: most enlisted men had to serve a total of only one year in Vietnam, many officers only six months. Please share this fact with all your friends. I dream of seeing an uprising against all the generals and politicians who blithely offer more soldiers to the meat grinder of their third, fourth, or fifth combat tours, some lasting as long as eighteen months.

My worst fear is that this is another example of pulling up the ladder. More than 90 percent of Americans do not serve in the military. They are no more likely to be killed than the generals and the politicians. I am very much afraid that they don't care as much as they should about this terrible problem.

Checkup, Aisle 3

Here's some good news, for a change. Those walk-in medical clinics you see at Wal-Mart, Walgreens, CVS, and other stores, according to a study by the RAND Corporation reported by the *Washington Post's* Margaret Shapiro, "provide care for routine illnesses that is as good as, and costs less than, similar care offered in doctors' offices, hospital emergency rooms and urgent care centers." This is especially important news with regard to emergency rooms, where so many health care dollars are squandered providing gold-plated care for minor ailments. Shapiro calls the cost savings in the case of these emergency rooms "quite dramatic." WM

Charles Peters is the founding editor of the *Washington Monthly*.

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Glenn Beck's Book Club

What the far right is reading.

By David Weigel

At the first antitax Tea Parties in February, some of the conservative malcontents who took to their city parks and traffic intersections to protest President Barack Obama's policies waved placards they'd designed that morning: "Atlas is Shrugging" and "Who is John Galt?" They were making reference to *Atlas Shrugged*, Ayn Rand's 1957 novel, in which productive members of society rebel and retreat from the economy, leaving the "looters" to reap what their high taxes and regulation had sown. The signs were there, literally, from the get-go: the conservative reaction to Democratic rule was rooted in apocalyptic visions of a state gone mad, between two covers.

In subsequent months, the right-wing revolt against Obama has continued to seek inspiration from printed manifestos. While the old guard, the Sean Hannitys and Bill O'Reillys, can still sell books, the titles that appear more prominently in Amazon rankings and on folding tables at marches are a mix of newer stars and unlikely ur-texts. They have adopted an old guide for the left because they think liberals used it to plot their political takeover. They've latched onto other books that promise to reveal how so many of their fellow Americans have been lulled into supporting Europe-style socialism. The movement's most popular books have loftier aspirations, providing activists with new ammunition—from the Founders, economists, the conservative media—to rebel against the president.

***Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals*, by Saul Alinsky (1971).** John McCain's too-late attempt to tar Obama with his connections to New Left veterans like Bill Ayers didn't amount to much at the polls. Ironically, that failure convinced many conservatives that Obama's wild-eyed pals and mentors had been on to something, and this 1971 tract by famed community organizer Saul Alinsky, long a mainstay of the activist left, is now required reading on the right as well. New employees of Dick Armey's FreedomWorks get copies at the door; James O'Keefe III, the cheeky twenty-five-year-old who planned the hidden-camera sting of ACORN, said he was inspired by Alinsky's call for lefty radicals to "make the enemy live up to their own book of rules."

Alinsky's recommendation to mock political opponents has been even more influential. "It is almost impossible to counterattack ridicule," he writes. "Also it infuriates the opposition, who then react to your advantage." For evidence of how that works, ask Susan Roesgen, a CNN reporter who grew enraged by a Tea Party sign comparing Obama to Hitler, snapped at a protester, and lost her job.

***The 5000 Year Leap: A Miracle That Changed the World*, by W. Cleon Skousen (1981).** During his lifetime, W. Cleon Skousen—Mormon theologian, historian, and New World Order conspiracist—was regarded by most mainstream conservatives as a kook. In many bookstores it would've been hard to find a copy of his 1981 book *The 5000 Year Leap*, in which Skousen—who died in 2006—argued that the Founders were divinely inspired when they drafted the Constitution, and were convinced that "without religion the government of a free people cannot be maintained."

Fortunately for Skousen's publishers, the historian has found a posthumous disciple in Glenn Beck, who wrote the forward to the new edition of *The 5000 Year Leap* and has called the book "essential to understanding why our Founders built this Republic the way they did." The book

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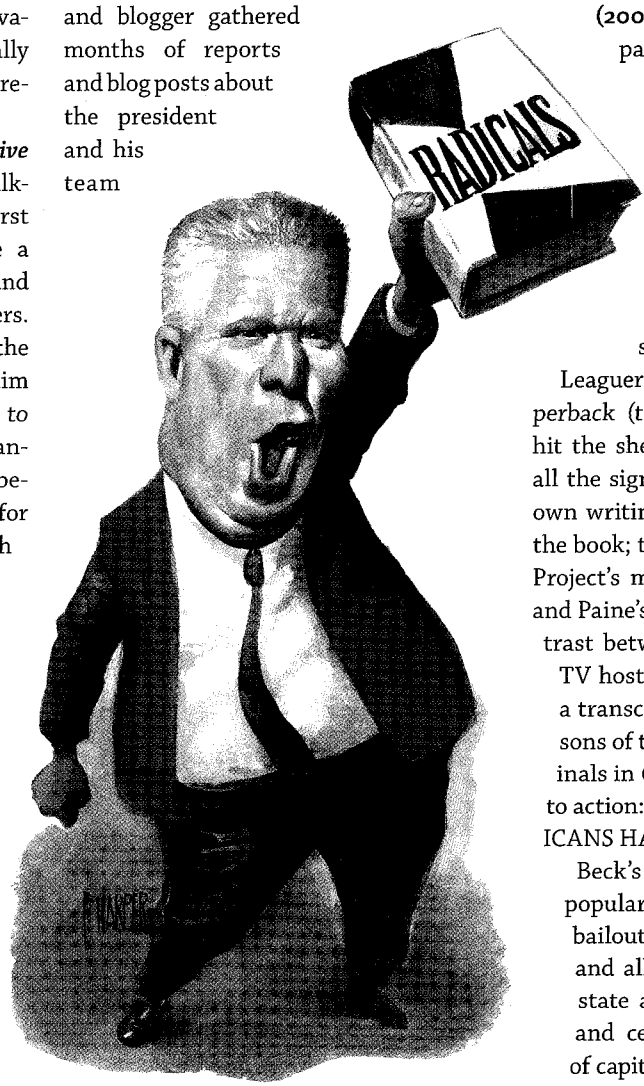
shot to number one on Amazon's best-seller list when Beck endorsed it in March, and sales have remained strong. Skousen's ability to wend together Bible verses and economic theories from Ludwig von Mises to Milton Friedman has provided intellectual ballast for the Tea Party crowd. There are flashes of nonsense, such as the instructions to meditate on the wings of the American eagle, complete with illustration. But Skousen outlines a conservative Christian case that debt will morally wreck America, a message that has resounded at the Tea Parties.

***Liberty and Tyranny: A Conservative Manifesto*, by Mark Levin (2009).** Talk-radio host Mark Levin is hardly the first conservative shouting head to write a book—Laura Ingraham, Ann Coulter, and Bill O'Reilly have all produced best-sellers. But those books didn't much inform the conservative movement—they took aim at fleeting targets and mostly served to reinforce the authors' broadcasting franchises. Levin's book, by contrast, has become totemic, a sort of little red book for the right; in radio ads, Rush Limbaugh called it the kind of book that gets passed between heretics, hidden in a brown wrapper.

On his syndicated radio show, Levin—a conservative lawyer and Reagan administration veteran—will joke about Hillary "Rotten" Clinton's thighs and Nancy "Stretch" Pelosi's skin. On the page, he's a sober intellectual. His manifesto is divided into ten stoic lessons—"On the Free Market," "On Immigration," "On Enviro-Statism"—culminating in a list of conservative demands. That list doesn't differ much from the minutes of an Orange County GOP breakfast, and the book has proved more influential for its snack-sized lessons in economics and history. "Modern Liberalism," writes Levin, "promotes what French historian Alexis de Tocqueville described as a soft tyranny, which becomes increasingly more oppressive, potentially leading to a hard tyranny (some form of totalitarianism)."

***Culture of Corruption: Obama and His Team of Tax Cheats, Crooks, and Cronies*, by Michelle Malkin (2009).** The community organizing group ACORN had vexed Republican campaign operatives for decades. It's now a household name among rank-and-file conservatives, in part thanks to Michelle Malkin's work portraying the group as a "criminal enterprise," the ultimate example of the liberal push to centralize power and loot taxpayers. The conservative columnist and blogger gathered months of reports and blog posts about the president and his team and put them between covers, with seventy-five pages of endnotes. (Tellingly, the jacket copy promotes Malkin not as a conservative bomb tosser, but as an investigative journalist.)



In addition to making "ACORN" a popular catch-all epithet at the Tea Parties, Malkin—who is Filipina American—has also been the chief exponent of the argument that the media gave the Obamas a free ride because of their race. "Cronies come in all colors," she writes of Bill Ayers. "White, black ... and pinko, too." EPA administrator Lisa P. Jackson also got a pass because "national journalists seemed more interested in her skin color than the dark spots on her resume."

***Glenn Beck's Common Sense: The Case Against an Out-of-Control Government, Inspired by Thomas Paine*, by Glenn Beck (2009).** In the new conservative pantheon, the ratings-grabbing Fox News talk-show host Glenn Beck is the great synthesizer and popularizer, leaning heavily on sources such as Skousen and compressing their already-limited explanations of economic theories into short blasts of anger at "the Ivy Leaguers" and bankers. This slim paperback (there is no hardcover edition) hit the shelves in June 2009, and it has all the signs of quick turnaround. Beck's own writing composes only 104 pages of the book; the rest is given over to his 9.12 Project's manifesto, a short reading list, and Paine's *Common Sense*. The direct contrast between Paine and Beck does the TV host no favors; the book reads like a transcript of his show, with comparisons of the political parties to the criminals in *Ocean's Eleven* and all-caps calls to action: "WE ARE NOT SHEEP. AMERICANS HAVE NEVER BEEN SHEEP."

Beck's manifesto is as muddled as it is popular. He argues that the tax code, bailouts of failing banks, Americorps, and all the programs of the modern state are about control, not charity, and certainly not the preservation of capitalism. At the same time, he argues that a fine result of the 1994 Republican Revolution was the enforcement of decades of progressive legislation, such as the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970 and the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993. The ideology and the solutions are a bit of a mess—Beck's ideal government is run by rotating teams of Tea Parties and torch-wielding villagers. WM

David Weigel is a reporter for the *Washington Independent*.

Fred Harper

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AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Big Bother

How a million surveillance cameras in London are proving George Orwell wrong.

By Jamie Malanowski

Islington is a fashionable neighborhood in North London, a gentrified residential area described, if only by real estate agents, as the new Notting Hill. In 1944, however, many of its characteristic four-story eighteenth-century townhouses had been broken into flats for working-class families, and it was into one of those, on the top floor of 27 Canonbury Square, overlooking a small preserve of green, that George Orwell moved with his wife and son after a V-2 rocket demolished their previous home. The space was drab, drafty, and leaky, but proved, in its way, inspiring. Descriptions in his next novel of an apartment, where "the plaster flaked constantly from ceilings and walls, the pipes burst in every hard frost, the roof leaked whenever there was snow," and of its occupant's wearying climb up the staircase, which he took "slowly, resting several times on the way," show that *1984*, the visionary novel about life in an all-seeing totalitarian state, began taking shape in those rooms. It is no small irony that today, across the square from Orwell's home, two traffic cameras operate all day; and that the rear windows of his building are in the frame of security cameras set outside a conference center; and that there's a camera at a car dealership by Orwell's pub, and three more at the local grocery. All told, there are thirty-two closed-circuit television cameras (CCTV) running twenty-four hours a day within 200 yards of the place where the chilly thought of the perpetually watching Big Brother had its incubation.

Ironic to find so many, but not unexpected; you could have picked any Briton from Shakespeare to Sid Vicious, and odds would favor finding cameras near his stomping grounds. For the last quarter century, under Conservative and Labor governments alike, the United Kingdom has conducted a living experiment on the use of cameras to conduct domestic surveillance that would have made Stasi

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operatives green with envy. There are roughly 4.3 million cameras in the UK—a million of them in the city of London alone, according to the Metropolitan Police Service. They are operated by the Metropolitan Police and by the London Underground, by private security firms and local governments, by schools and hospitals and parking lots and chip shops. They survey busy intersections, Tube platforms, and significant buildings, but also the entrances to pubs, apartment buildings, and health clubs. In some parts of London, they are literally everywhere. Walk in any direction in Westminster, for example, where Parliament and the government buildings are collected, and you'll see cameras prominently poking out from the sides of most buildings, large, gray, boxy sentinels forming part of the so-called Ring of Steel that monitors all traffic in and out of the most iconic, target-rich part of London. At Canary Wharf, the sprawling, shiny, pulsating business complex on the south bank of the Thames, the cameras are smaller, subtler, architecturally integrated into the design but nonetheless visible, reassuringly present but not so obvious as to disrupt the money making. But in poorer East London, you have to look long and hard to see more than the humble traffic cam. And one's reactions vary with the coverage: in the face of a massive deployment of cameras in a bustling, prosperous part of town, one feels slightly crimped by the awareness of being watched. But when one is a stranger in a strange place where the environment is a bit seedy and there are no cameras, one feels just a little bit more alone.

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And one thing is sure: more are coming. Right now there is one camera for every fourteen people in the UK, and if they keep being installed as fast as they have been, they will one day outnumber people. The trend has also caught on in the United States, with growing numbers of CCTV cameras popping up in cities from Los Angeles to Chicago. The proliferation of CCTV and other surveillance tools strikes many as sinister. "Two years ago I warned that we were in danger of sleepwalking into a surveillance society," said British Information Commissioner Richard Thomas in 2006. "Today I fear that we are in fact waking up to a surveillance society that is already all around us."

There are indeed emerging surveillance technologies worth worrying about—from "data mining" systems employed by the Bush Pentagon to a host of security measures advocated by Britain's Labor government, such as mandatory tracking devices on all cars. But when it comes to CCTV, the great Orwellian fears haven't come close to being realized. The cameras have not become appendages of an all-seeing, all-powerful government. Perhaps because bureaucracies in the UK are mighty forces for inefficiency and inaction, perhaps because abuses have been reined in by good English common sense, the cameras have been deployed in a largely benign way. And despite the fact that the most extensive study of the cameras' effectiveness—one commissioned by the Home Office of the British government—found no evidence to support the claim that CCTV cameras actually deter crime, surveys show most UK citizens welcome them. The reason for their popularity seems to be the sense of security they offer and their unquestionable usefulness in catching criminals once crimes have occurred. Orwell, it seems, was prescient about the coming ubiquity of surveillance cameras, but when it comes to their effects on individual liberty he missed the mark.

Some of the most gripping images of the last few years were shot beginning at 12:26 p.m. on July 21, 2005, on a subway car just short of the Oval station on the Tube's Northern line. Captured in intervals every few seconds by CCTV cameras positioned at opposite ends of the car, recorded in dim light that creates a kind of milky filter, the scenes show a group of passengers, most prominent among them a stocky young man with a knapsack wearing a navy sweatshirt that says NEW YORK on the front. In the first image, he is standing there, hand in his pocket, unremarkable; in the next, everybody is scrambling away from him, trying to get out of the car. The next image, taken from the other end of the car, shows a tall man in a white T-shirt helping a woman with a baby, wrestling her into the next car. Then he turns, and from a distance of eight feet or so he begins speaking to the young man in the sweatshirt. The conversation wasn't recorded, but later, testifying at trial, the man in the T-shirt—a fireman named Angus Campbell—said, "I was shouting at him, 'What have you done? What have you done?' I was probably quite vociferous. I was telling him to lie down." Then the train reaches the station and the doors open and the passengers flee, the man in sweatshirt included. His name is Ramzi Mohammed, and cameras follow him in his distinctive New York sweatshirt as he races through the glossy white-tile corridors of the station and out onto the street.

Those pictures, and similar pictures of three fellow conspirators, who on two other subway cars and a bus had

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also tried to explode bombs that turned out to be duds, were in the hands of the police within hours, were published in the late editions of the newspapers, and were splashed across television screens that night. "I was struck by how normal [the men] looked," said Tim O'Toole, then the managing director of the London Underground. "That's what's creepy about it. The guy didn't look extraordinary in any way, and there he was, on his way to what he thought would be his death."

O'Toole is a professional railroad man and attorney born and raised in Pittsburgh who ran the Tube from 2003 until his resignation in February 2009. He's been called the best public servant in London, and thirty-five years ago he was my college roommate. Two weeks before the stillborn attacks of July 21, O'Toole was one of the key officials coordinating the response to the deadly attacks of July 7, in which suicide bombers on three subways and one bus set off explosions that killed fifty-two passengers and injured at least 700 more. Working out of the Underground's operations center near St. James's Park, O'Toole had his team shut down the system, evacuated to safety a quarter-million people who were on the trains, and then succeeded in getting the deserted system up and running in time for the next morning's commute.

The prompt appearance of the CCTV images on the 21st was a tremendous relief to a city where dozens of police officers were still reviewing hundreds of hours of CCTV images taken on the 7th, trying to tease from vague faces on crowded platforms the identities of that crime's perpetrators. "Seeing those pictures took away all the tension," says O'Toole, "because the message we were able to send, subliminally, was 'Okay, now we know who those guys are, and we're going to find them.' Without that ability to project control, everybody would have been afraid." Indeed, within days, the suspects were in custody.

Fear, control, normalcy: concepts that have dominated in the West since the attacks of September 11, concepts never really out of discussion. CCTV emerged as a tool for public control in the 1980s during another period of unease. British life was marked by rising crime, labor unrest, and strapped resources, and Michael Howard, who was John Major's home secretary—a job that involves overseeing law enforcement and security, among other responsibilities—latched onto the idea of CCTV as a reasonably cheap and effective tool for reexerting a sense of control and restoring a sense of normalcy. Calling it "a real asset to communities, a great deterrent to crime and huge reassurance to the public," Howard began funding CCTV systems in towns and villages. Although there was no research to back up Howard's assertions, a lot of local governments thought that the presence of cameras would reassure people that it was safe to go shopping, and installed some systems.

Then came the incident that supercharged the adoption of CCTV. In the afternoon of February 12, 1993, a two-year-old boy named James Bulger disappeared from a shopping center in Liverpool. Investigators eliminated the family as suspects, and then focused on reports that an older man with a ponytail had been hanging around. Sometime after midnight, police, hoping to spot this putative pedophile, reviewed the videotapes from the security cameras at the shopping center. What they saw shocked the world: a shot of little James being led away by two older boys. The following afternoon James's body turned up. Although the identity of the abductors could not be discerned from the pictures, police soon received an anonymous tip naming two ten-year-olds, who were later found guilty of the crime. From this senseless, disturbing incident, CCTV acquired a powerful, visceral, illogical justification: anyone against CCTV must be for child murder. "You see that picture everywhere now," says one observer. "It's the modern image of the devil, the contemporary image of danger in our midst." In the aftermath of the Bulger murder, and over the decade that followed, funding for the systems exploded.

It is no small irony that today there are thirty-two closed-circuit television cameras running twenty-four hours a day within 200 yards of George Orwell's home, where the chilly thought of the perpetually watching Big Brother had its incubation.

Which is how there got to be so many, not from any centralized initiative, but in an ad hoc, incremental, decentralized accumulation, to the point that someone working in Central London is seen by an estimated 300 cameras a day. It seems like an alarming number, but the practical effect on a person's behavior is negligible. "I've got news for you," says one man, shrugging off the significance. "While you're being seen by 300 cameras, you're also being seen by 25,000 people." The cameras are not located in places where people have an expectation of privacy, and in many cases you would probably not notice them were you not alerted to their presence by one of the large yellow signs that the law mandates be placed in plain view in proximity to the camera. It's also true that in a lot of places, while an individual may be on camera, it's not even an individual who is being watched. At the big modern Whitehall Station, one person monitors eight screens that get feeds from more

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than eighty cameras; the images on the screens change every ten seconds or so, and monitors are trained not to see people per se, but to see situations, and to recognize among a tide of images of normal traffic that person or object or situation that is abnormal. The monitors aren't really seeing people; they're seeing crowds.

And while London's million cameras are just a dizzying number, it's important to realize that they are not linked in an omni-observant panopticon. The cameras are in many different hands, so while it is possible, after a great crime like the July 7 bombings, for police to reconstruct a perpetrator's trail through banks and service stations and ultimately into the Tube, police could not continuously track a suspect from one point to another across more than one system in real time. That doesn't prevent the public from believing that it can be done. "We have a show called *Spooks*," says Kevin Clack, one of the Tube's security managers, talking about a BBC drama about MI-5, the government's internal security agency (the show was called *MI-5* when it ran in the U.S.): "We let them use the stations to film in, and in one episode, one of the agents chased a guy into the Whitehall station, and then ran into our CCTV operating center and began downloading information from MI-5 and sending images from the CCTV cameras to his chums and so on. Well, it was all made up. We're not linked to MI-5, but I'm sure many viewers believe we are now."

So elevated are the expectations for CCTV, says Clack, that when people are the victims of a crime on the Tube, they expect the incident to have been captured, and are often angry if it has not been.

But if it's surprising that there is no amazing linkup between the cameras and Scotland Yard and Interpol and the Justice League of America, here's something even more astonishing: there doesn't seem to be a great deal of interest on the part of police to use the things, at least not preemptively. From the beginning, the Home Office set up the systems with town councils and other civilian authorities; for whatever reason—disdain for new methods, wariness of a technology that would invite allusions to Big Brother—the Association of Chief Police Officers declined to get involved. Later, after the cameras were set up to facilitate traffic control and parking enforcement, many police departments got involved on an ad hoc basis to get some law enforcement benefit. But the return influence on police

A closed-circuit camera captured two-year-old James Bulger being lured out of a northern England shopping center in 1993. The footage helped police catch the two ten-year-old boys who had tortured and killed Bulger—and cemented British opinion in favor of surveillance cameras.

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practices seems small. "There was no evidence of any significant or systematic attempt by the police to incorporate CCTV into their existing information or surveillance networks," writes Oxford criminologist Benjamin Goold in his 2003 book *CCTV and Policing*. "None of the stations had made any effort to establish a system whereby information collected by CCTV could be made available to other police divisions or departments ... Nor had any provision been made for keeping CCTV operators informed of ongoing police surveillance operations being carried out in their local area." In a lot of places, Goold writes, they didn't even adjust the patrols to complement the coverage they got from CCTV. It's hardly surprising, then, that studies have found the cameras do little to deter crime. Apart from any palliative feelings they generate among the public, the major benefit of these contraptions seems to lie in their ability to help the police find out who did what and how after a crime has occurred.

Instead of the problems and issues that come from a centralized authority exploiting an integrated system, then, you get the problems and issues that come from human foibles set free to operate under loose control. There are guidelines for CCTV use that have generally worked, but there are the stories about the camera that was pointed at somebody's bedroom window; about prejudiced operators who called in the cops to question people the operators thought undesirable; about the operator who caught a couple having sex against a wall, and burned a disk of the event to show his mates; about the parking lot guards at a university who were reviewing tapes for evidence of break-ins, discovered instead two teachers going at it in a car, and then gossiped about it, humiliating the teachers. And while it's possible that some motivated leader could order up the construction of the IT infrastructure that would link all these eyes, that would be an expensive upgrade unlikely to happen soon. Consider: in this day of powerful servers that connect computers around the globe, the link between the London Metropolitan Police's communication system and that of the Tube's Transport Police is a pleasant police officer named Vanessa, who reads reports of crimes in progress off of one system and inputs that news into the other. This is because the communication system of the Metropolitan Police is based on a Commodore 64 computer, which may be out of date and incompatible with the Windows operating system but it works fine and everybody in the department knows how to use it, and no one is going to invest the time or money to upgrade.

So what is there to worry about? The technology's not all that, the police don't seem all fired up to exploit the cameras' potential, and the public seems to like them. Well, there's just no getting around what one might call the philosophical problem. "With CCTV, everyone becomes an object of suspicion, just by virtue of being filmed," says Brendan O'Neill, a commentator and the editor of Spiked-online.com. "During the Enlightenment, the assumption was that you are a free citizen and should be left alone unless you have done something wrong. Now the assumption is turned completely on its head. Now you have to perform your innocence. You have to prove that you are good, rather than for the state to prove that you are not."

O'Neill makes an interesting point. There has always been the recognition that one has more freedom to act in private than in public, that there are things you can do indoors that would be socially unacceptable, if not actually illegal, in public. But in practice, who among us has always observed that distinction? Almost all of us have followed the urge to do something foolhardy but most likely fun—smoking a joint in an alley, drinking in a parking lot, having sexual congress in a dark and deserted corner of a park—that we as autonomous free people chose to do, and, crucially, thought we could get away with doing. It is interesting that the most direct resistance to the implementation of CCTV has come in the rural areas where the cameras are used to catch speeders on lightly traveled country roads—people alone on a highway who felt capable of deciding for themselves how fast they could go. Out there, the cameras get broken.

> *"Two years ago I warned that we were in danger of sleepwalking into a surveillance society," said the British information commissioner. "Today I fear that we are in fact waking up to a surveillance society that is already all around us."*

Of course, most of us have never lived a moment of our lives as wholly autonomous individuals, and we are for the most part happy that some ancestor swapped his autonomy for the protection of some big strong guy on a horse. Governments may often be dangerous, but people are scary, a point which was brought home not long ago to Johann Hari, a columnist for the *Independent*, when he witnessed an early-morning street incident in which a well-dressed chap was beating a homeless person. The homeless man ran away and his assailant claimed self-defense, and that might have been the end of it, except

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that the incident was caught on CCTV, and it showed the banker initiating the conflict. "After that, I began thinking about CCTV," Hari says. "The July 7th bombers were identified through CCTV. The July 21st conspirators were caught through the use of CCTV. The Soho nail bomber, who killed three people in 1999, was caught through CCTV. Cameras didn't identify the Ipswich Ripper, a man who murdered six prostitutes, but they tracked three of his victims, which helped the police focus on a suspect. Now, you can say that CCTV somehow inhibits your freedom, but those people who did not get blown up in the next attack of the Soho nail bomber are now more free. Prostitutes in Ipswich are now more free. Homeless people in my neighborhood are now more free. The fact that these cameras could be abused by an oppressive government in the future is an argument against having an oppressive government, not against the technology."

The cameras have not become appendages of an all-seeing, all-powerful government. Perhaps because UK bureaucracies are mighty forces for inefficiency and inaction, perhaps because abuses have been reined in by common sense, the cameras have been deployed in a largely benign way.

Which brings us to the future. The performance of CCTV in Britain has been generally benign, but as we all know, past performance is not a guarantee of future results. The next generation of cameras will be far more capable; planners are experimenting with cameras that have facial recognition software and voice recognition capability, so observers can identify when people are getting angry or are using words associated with criminal activity. (Think of all the nasty things you have said about Vice President Cheney over the years, and how much time you'd like to spend explaining to authorities that no, really, you're just a blowhard.) Perhaps most creepily, developers are also trying out cameras that will tell you to put out your cigarette or pick up the candy wrapper you've just dropped.

These inventions are just part of what might be waiting on the near horizon. In the aftermath of 9/11 and 7/7 the British government has pushed other programs, like instituting a national biometric ID card, a national DNA database, a program to track all electronic communications, and a plan to put a locating device on all automobiles. The public views these initiatives with far greater suspicion than it sees CCTV, thanks in part to a drumbeat of news reports about diskettes containing secure documents and sensitive records being left by government officials in taxicabs, and articles about local officials using antiterrorism legislation passed after 9/11 to mount surveillance operations to catch people suspected of littering, dumping, fishing illegally, and applying to a school outside their district. With no one giving Gordon Brown's government much chance of surviving the 2010 elections, and with the Conservative Party having already expressed its opposition to a national identity card and promising to eliminate funding for some of these other programs, the drive to implement the programs is apt to be stalled—or at least continued under other auspices. After all, the government may not be able to locate you, but the phone company can, and the government may not have a central ID card, but the Tesco grocery chain has an affinity card that knows how much oatmeal and ketchup and booze and condoms and Wellbutrin its customers have bought. The coming generation is far more comfortable with technology; it expects institutions to be equipped and up-to-date, and having lived so much of its life so far on Facebook and MySpace, it has a far more relaxed view of privacy than its parents possess (there are stories of guys who've been caught brawling on CCTV asking cops to burn them a copy of the fight). When that generation has its Bulger murder or July 7 attack, these capabilities will be waiting. And as we saw with CCTV, events, more than people, were the driving force behind its adoption.

So, Orwell had it wrong. His apartment isn't under the view of one oppressive Big Brother but thirty-two mostly harmless Little Brothers. Technological creep has become technological flood, too powerful to be stemmed and far too beneficial to be stymied by potential risks. The UK's experience with CCTV cameras ought to give us at least some faith that democratic governments can handle these new technologies. But as with nuclear power or weapons of mass destruction, surveillance is a phenomenon where the costs of mistakes or abuses are beyond calculation. The history of the future may well be determined by whether those who are supposed to benefit from surveillance cozily nestle under its blanket of protection, or stare back at it as unblinkingly as it stares at us. WM

Jamie Malanowski, former editor at *Playboy* and *Spy* magazine, is a writer living in New York. His most recent book is *The Coup*, a satire about the nation's capital.

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Martine Leveque.

The Subprime Student Loan Racket

With help from Washington, the for-profit college industry is loading up millions of low-income students with debt they'll never pay off.

By Stephen Burd

At the age of forty-three, Martine Leveque decided it was time to start over. For several years, she had worked in the movie business, writing subtitles in Italian and French for English-language films, but her employer moved overseas. She then tried her hand at sales, but each time the economy dipped sales tumbled, along with her income, and as a single mother with a teenage son, she wanted a job that offered more security. She decided to pursue a career in nursing, a high-demand field where she could also do some good.

While researching her options online, Leveque stumbled on the Web site for Everest College, part of the Corinthian Colleges chain, which pictured students in lab coats and scrubs probing a replica of a human heart and a string of glowing testimonials from graduates. "Now I know exactly where I am going. And now I'm making very good money," enthused a former student named Anjali B. The school, near Leveque's home in Alhambra, California, offered a Licensed Vocational Nursing program that would take her just one year to complete. When Leveque contacted the admissions office, she was told she would receive hands-on training from experienced nurses in state-of-the-art labs with the most modern equipment—including a recently purchased $30,000 mannequin that could simulate the birthing process. She also says recruiters told her that she would be able to do rotations at the University of California, Los Angeles Medical Center, one of the nation's best hospitals.

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Leveque was intrigued, though she was initially put off by the $29,000 tuition. But the school's recruiters assured her there was nothing to be concerned about: Everest had an exceptional track record of helping students find employment—they claimed the typical Everest College LVN graduates landed a job paying between $28 and $35 an hour straight out of school. And the school would arrange a financial aid package to cover her costs.

In the end, Leveque decided to enroll. The day she came in to fill out her paperwork, she says, the recruiters rushed her through the process and discouraged her from taking the forms home to look over. They told her that she would be taking out private loans in addition to federal loans that are traditionally used to pay educational expenses, but did not explain what the terms of those loans would be. "They just kept telling me that 'we're with you,' and that they would try to get me the maximum amount of federal loans allowed," she says. Only later did she learn that those private loans—which made up two-thirds of her "financial aid" package—carried double-digit interest rates and other onerous terms.

"If it were me, I never would have loaned me the money," says one student. "Who in their right mind would lend $100,000 in unsecured debt to an art major?"

To make matters worse, the program did not come close to delivering on the promises that had been made. The instructors had little recent medical experience. Instead of really teaching, she says, they usually just read textbooks aloud in class and sometimes offered students the answers on tests ahead of time. On the rare occasions when Leveque and her class were given time in the lab, she found that the equipment was broken down and shoddy—except for the expensive new mannequin, which no one knew how to use. Instead of the promised rotations at UCLA Medical Center, her clinical training consisted of helping pass out pills at a nursing home. (A spokeswoman for Corinthian Colleges denied many of Leveque's allegations, insisting that the company does not condone cheating, that all LVN instructors at Everest College have "at least the minimum qualifications" set by the California Board of Vocational Nursing, and that UCLA Medical Center "is not and has never been" one of the school's official clinical training sites.)

Since graduating in 2008, Leveque has been unable to find a nursing job, perhaps because she never learned how to perform basic tasks such as giving shots. Instead, she works as an occasional home health care aid earning at the most $1,200 a month—not enough to pay her rent on the cramped apartment she shares with her sister and son or keep gas in her car, much less pay off her student loans. As a result, her loan balance has ballooned to $40,000, and she has no idea how she will ever pay it off. "My credit is ruined," Leveque says. "I made one mistake, and I will be paying for it for the rest of my life."

Leveque's story is far from unique. Each year, more than two million Americans enroll in for-profit colleges, also known as proprietary schools, and their popularity has only grown since the financial crisis. While traditional four-year colleges are struggling with dwindling student bodies and budget gaps, proprietary schools are reporting record enrollments as the newly unemployed try to retool their skills so they can wade back into the job market. Some of the largest for-profit chains say their numbers have doubled over the last year.

The students who are flocking to these schools are mostly poor and working class, and they rely heavily on student loans to cover tuition. According to a College Board analysis of Department of Education data, 60 percent of bachelor's degree recipients at for-profit colleges graduate with $30,000 or more in student loans—one and a half times the percentage of those at traditional private colleges and three times more than those at four-year public colleges and universities. Similarly, those who earn two-year degrees from proprietary schools rack up nearly three times as much debt as those at community colleges, which serve a similar student population. Proprietary school students are also much more likely to take on private student loans, which, unlike their federal counterparts, are not guaranteed by the federal government, offer scant consumer protections, and tend to charge astronomical interest—in some cases as high as 20 percent.

These figures are all the more troubling in light of these schools' spotty record of graduating students; the median graduation rate for proprietary schools is only 38 percent—by far the lowest rate in the higher education sector. What's more, even those students who make it through often can't find jobs. The reason for this is simple: while some proprietary schools offer a good education, many more are subpar at best. Thus large numbers of students leave with little to show for their effort other than a heap of debt. Not surprisingly, students at proprietary schools are far more likely to default on their loans than those at other colleges.

The appalling treatment of disadvantaged students at the hands of proprietary schools ought to be a national scandal, especially at a time when America desperately needs more college graduates to stay competitive. But the problem has barely registered in Washington. That's partly because the proprietary school lobby has enough clout among lawmakers on both sides of the aisle to keep the issue quiet. But Congress and the Obama administration have also had their hands full advancing other higher education

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reforms—in particular, legislation to kick private lenders out of the federally subsidized student loan program. This will create tens of billions of dollars in cost savings that will go toward larger Pell grants for low-income students. But that measure, vital as it is, affects only lending within the federal student loan program. It leaves untouched the private loans that are increasingly being foisted on students like Leveque and the loosely regulated schools that are profiting as a result.

The for-profit higher education sector is no stranger to scandal. In the 1980s and early '90s, it came to light that hundreds of fly-by-night schools had been set up solely to reap profits from the federal student loan programs, in part by preying on poor people and minorities. The most unscrupulous of them enrolled people straight off the welfare lines, and got them to sign up for the maximum amount of federal student loans available—sometimes without their knowledge or consent.

The rampant abuses caught the attention of the news media, sent shockwaves through Capitol Hill, and led to a year-long, high-profile Senate investigation led by Senator Sam Nunn, the Georgia Democrat. The standing-room-only hearings had all the trappings of scandal, with trade school officials pleading the Fifth and a school owner, who had been convicted of defrauding the government, brought to the witness table in handcuffs and leg irons.

Key lawmakers considered kicking all trade schools out of the federal student aid programs—a virtual death sentence given the institutions' heavy reliance on these funds. But Congress ultimately stepped back from the brink and instead strengthened the Department of Education's authority to weed out problem institutions. Under the new rules, for-profit colleges had to get at least 15 percent of their tuition money from sources other than federal loans and financial aid. Also, if more than a quarter of a school's students consistently defaulted on their loans within two years of graduating or dropping out, the school could be barred from participating in federal financial aid programs. The idea was to get rid of those schools that were set up solely to feed on federal funds and didn't provide the meaningful training students needed to get jobs and pay off their debt. As a result, during the 1990s more than 1,500 proprietary schools were either kicked out of the government's financial aid programs altogether or withdrew voluntarily. In an effort to rein in abusive recruiting tactics, in 1992 Congress also barred schools from compensating recruiters based on the number of students they brought in.

These changes shook up the industry. The old generation of trade schools gradually died off and were replaced by a new breed of for-profit colleges—mostly huge, publicly traded corporations. The largest, the Apollo Group, owns the University of Phoenix, which serves more than 400,000 students at some ninety campuses and 150 learning centers worldwide. Others include the Career Education Corporation, which serves 90,000 students at seventy-five campuses around the world, and Corinthian Colleges, which serves 69,000 students at more than 100 colleges in the United States and Canada.

Not only did these companies promise that their schools would be more responsive to the needs of students and employers than the previous generation, they also said they would be more accountable to the public because, as publicly traded companies, they were heavily regulated. "We've seen a fire across the prairie, and that fire has had a purifying effect," Omer Waddles, then the president of the Career College Association, told the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in 1997. "As our sector has weathered the storms of recent years, a stronger group of schools is emerging to carry, at a high level of credibility, the mantle of training and career development."

In reality, the new breed of schools had quite a bit in common with their predecessors; in some cases, they even operated out of the same buildings and employed the same personnel. What's more, rather than making them more accountable, the fact that they were publicly traded created a powerful incentive for them to game the system. After all, to keep their stock prices up and investors happy, the schools had to show that they were constantly expanding, which meant there was intense pressure to get students in the door and signed up for classes and financial aid.

The appalling treatment of disadvantaged students at the hands of proprietary schools ought to be a national scandal, especially at a time when America desperately needs more college graduates to stay competitive. But the problem has barely registered in Washington.

With so much at stake, these schools quickly found ways to skirt the new rules. To get around the caps on student loan default rates, for instance, many of them began hiring agencies to help former students get forbearances or offering lines of credit so alums could make their student-loan payments—but only during the initial two-year window, when defaults were counted against the school by the Department of Education. After that, students were left to wrestle with the debt on their own. As for the rule requiring

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schools to get at least 15 percent of tuition from nongovernment sources, it had some unintended consequences. Rather than, say, enrolling people who could afford to pay some tuition out of pocket, many schools started pushing students to take out private student loans.

Previously, this kind of loan had gone exclusively to graduate and professional students pursuing careers in high-paying fields like law and medicine. The financially needy students who attend for-profit institutions couldn't qualify for them because of their less-than-stellar credit records, their lousy graduation rates, and their spotty record of finding work in their field. But this began to change around 2000. At the time, college tuition was skyrocketing—a trend that has only accelerated—and federal grants and loans weren't keeping pace. To fill the gap, financial aid officers started cutting deals with lenders to bring in private loan money. In the case of proprietary colleges, most of the large publicly traded chains forged arrangements with Sallie Mae, the nation's largest student loan company. (Once a quasi-government agency like Fannie Mae, it became entirely private in 2004.) In exchange for pots of private student loan funds that they could dole out at will—meaning without regard for students' ability to repay the debt—the schools gave Sallie Mae the right to be the exclusive provider of federal student loans on their campuses. Lenders vie fiercely for this privilege because federal loans are guaranteed by the government, meaning the Treasury pays back nearly all the money if the borrower defaults. Thus lenders get to pocket generous fees and interest and bear almost no risk.

The standing-room-only Senate hearings had all the trappings of scandal, with for-profit school officials pleading the Fifth and a school owner, who had been convicted of defrauding the government, brought to the witness table in handcuffs and leg irons.

Sallie Mae clearly understood that these private loans were going mostly to subprime borrowers who might not be able to pay them back; in 2007, Senate investigators uncovered internal company documents showing that executives expected a staggering 70 percent of its private student loans at one for-profit school to end in default. Investigators concluded that Sallie Mae viewed these loans as a "marketing expense"—a token sum to be paid in exchange for the chance to gorge on federal funds.

From the schools' perspective, it didn't much matter whether students would be able to pay off their debt any more than it mattered if they stuck with the program or graduated with the skills they needed. As long as students were enrolled long enough to be considered a "start," meaning that they attended classes for a week or two, the schools got to keep some of the money, and they got to include students in their official enrollment tally, which gave Wall Street the impression they were expanding. Having a cache of private loan funds to dole out also allowed the schools to clinch the deal right away—no need to grind through a stack of forms or wait for a third party to approve the loan application. Thus recruiters could lock students in before they experienced buyer's remorse.

At best, the George W. Bush administration and the Republican-led Congress turned a blind eye to these schemes. At worst, they made it easier for the schools to carry them out. In his first term, Bush packed the Department of Education with allies of the proprietary colleges. Before becoming the assistant secretary for postsecondary education, for example, Sally Stroup worked as a lobbyist for the University of Phoenix. Under her leadership, the agency took the teeth out of regulations that were designed to rein in abuses of the 1990s, including the incentive-compensation ban for recruiters.

Not surprisingly, many schools began resorting to hard-sell tactics to bring students in. In 2004, the Department of Education found that corporate bosses at the University of Phoenix routinely pressured and intimidated their recruiters to put "asses in the classes." At some of the campuses, enrollment counselors who didn't meet their targets were sent to the "Red Room," a glassed-in space where they worked the phones under intense management supervision. What's more, in recent years dozens of former students have filed suits alleging they were misled about classes and programs proprietary schools offered, as well as about their prospects for graduating and getting jobs in their fields of study. While the seriousness of the abuses vary, in some cases they amount to outright fraud, with recruiters pressuring students to sign up for classes that don't actually exist or to enroll in programs where the instructors lack even basic expertise in the field. The push to get students in the door also created more pressure to steer people into private loans.

The frenzy only intensified after Congress passed the Bankruptcy Abuse Prevention and Consumer Protection Act in 2005. This made it almost impossible for those who took out private student loans to discharge them in bankruptcy and, not surprisingly, turned the private student loan market into a much more appealing target for lenders.

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As a result of these changes, private loan borrowing has skyrocketed. In the last decade alone, it has grown an astounding 674 percent at colleges overall, when adjusted for inflation. The growth has been most dramatic at for-profit colleges, where the percentage of students taking out private loans jumped from 16 percent to 43 percent between 2004 and 2008, according to Department of Education data.

The spike in private loan borrowing is dismal news for students. Unlike traditional student loans, which have low, fixed interest rates, private educational loans generally have uncapped variable rates that can climb as high as 20 percent—on par with the most predatory credit cards. Private loans also come with much less flexible repayment options. Borrowers can't defer payments if they suffer economic hardship, for instance, and the size of their payment is not tied to income, as it sometimes is in the federal program. Private loans also lack basic consumer protections available to federal loan borrowers. With a traditional federal student loan, for example, if a borrower dies or becomes permanently disabled, the debt is forgiven, meaning they or their kin are no longer responsible for paying it off. The same goes if the school unexpectedly shuts down before a student graduates. But none of this is true of private loans. Also, because it is so difficult to discharge private student loans in bankruptcy, when students take them out to attend schools that provide no meaningful training or skills they can find themselves trapped in a spiral of debt that they have little prospect of escaping.

Theresa Sweet, a thirty-three-year-old California resident, took out about $100,000 in private loans between 2003 and 2006 to study photography at the Brooks Institute in Santa Barbara, which is owned by the Career Education Corporation. At the time, she says the Brooks recruiters—who have frequently been accused of misleading students—told her that graduates of their photography program typically made at least $60,000 straight out of school. In fact, since graduating three years ago she has been unable to find paid work in her field, and, while she has managed to get forbearances on her student loans, the interest has continued to stack up. She now owes more than $200,000.

Looking back, Sweet admits that she was naive in trusting the recruiters. But she can't help but wonder how she ever qualified for the loans in the first place, especially given that when she applied she was unemployed. "If it were me, I never would have loaned me the money," she says. "Who in their right mind would lend $100,000 in unsecured debt to an art major?"

Like Sweet, graduates of proprietary colleges often struggle to find jobs in their fields. This is because, in many cases, they don't get the skills they need to compete. After all, it's far easier and less expensive for schools to boost enrollment numbers through aggressive advertising and recruitment than to expend the resources to build quality schools. Corinthian and Career Education, which own the schools Leveque and Sweet attended, have faced the most damning allegations when it comes to educational quality and steering students into shady private loans. Other chains have better reputations on these fronts, among them the University of Phoenix and DeVry University. But even they have a spotty record of graduating students.

For awhile it looked like the meltdown on Wall Street, and the ensuing credit crunch, would put an end to predatory lending at for-profit schools. In 2008 Sallie Mae quit offering subprime private loans to students at for-profit colleges because the astronomical default rates had helped throw its stock price into a nosedive. But the proprietary college industry has found a way around this roadblock, namely making private loans directly to students, much the way used-car lots loan money to buyers rather than going through a third party. For example, in a recent earnings call with investors and analysts, Corinthian said that it plans to dole out roughly $130 million in "institutional loans" this year, while Career Education and ITT Educational Services Inc., another for-profit chain, have reported that they expect to lend a combined total of $125 million.

Unlike traditional student loans, which have low, fixed interest, private educational loans generally have uncapped variable rates that can climb as high as 20 percent—on par with the most predatory credit cards. Private loans also lack basic consumer protections.

These loans could prove to be even more toxic than the private ones offered by Sallie Mae. This is because some schools are packaging them as ordinary consumer credit, which has even fewer built-in safeguards than private student loans, especially when it comes to disclosure requirements. This makes it easier for schools to mislead borrowers about the terms of the debt they are taking on. In one class-action lawsuit filed earlier this year, former students of Colorado-based Westwood Colleges allege they were duped into borrowing institutional loans at a staggering 18 percent interest. According to the complaint, the college's corporate

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bosses advise their admissions officers to sign students up for these loans without revealing how costly they are going to be. Thus borrowers don't learn about the steep interest until after they leave school and receive their first loan bill. Worse, the lawsuit alleges that some students have been signed up for loans without their permission.

Jillian L. Estes, a Florida lawyer who represents the plaintiffs in the case, says she has been approached by two dozen former Westwood admissions representatives who admit that they deliberately avoided telling students about the terms of these loans. "They knew they'd never be able to enroll these students if they were up front with them," Estes explains. (In their written response to the lawsuit, Westwood College officials offered a "categorical rejection" of the allegations brought by Estes and her clients.)

Significantly, many proprietary schools are pushing institutional loans even when they know students won't be able to pay them off; Career Education and Corinthian Colleges only expect to recover roughly half of the money they distribute through their institutional lending programs, according to communications with shareholders. Why would they lend knowing they won't get the money back? Because any loss is more than offset by federal loans and financial aid dollars, which, despite the surge in private educational lending, still fund the bulk of tuition at proprietary schools. Say a student gets a $60,000 federal financial aid package and supplements it with a $20,000 institutional loan. The school comes out $40,000 ahead even if the borrower ultimately defaults. Plus, getting students in the door pumps up enrollment numbers, which makes for happy shareholders.

At best, the George W. Bush administration and the Republican-led Congress turned a blind eye to these schemes. At worst, they made it easier for the schools to carry them out. Bush packed the Department of Education with allies of the for-profit colleges.

Meanwhile, as the credit crunch eases, traditional lenders may well go back to making private loans to proprietary school students, especially given the changes afoot in the industry. President Obama aims to get rid of the program that allows lending companies to collect lucrative fees and interest for serving as the middleman on federal student loans and instead have the government offer the loans directly. Once forced out of the federal student loan program, traditional lenders will have a powerful incentive to seek profits by wading deeper into the private student loan market, and for-profit schools, with their exponential growth, could once again be an appealing target.

The good news is that the Obama administration seems more inclined than its predecessor to stand up against the abuses of proprietary schools. In May, the Department of Education revealed that it was considering reversing changes the Bush administration made to weaken the incentive-compensation ban. It is also thinking about adding teeth to the rules requiring proprietary colleges to show that graduates are finding "gainful employment" in their field and cracking down on schools that willfully mislead prospective students. "Our overall goal at the Department of Education in post-secondary education is to make sure that students ... have the information they need to make good choices," Robert Shireman, the deputy undersecretary of education, told financial analysts and investors during a conference call earlier this year.

These proposals are a good start, but more steps will be needed. For starters, the Department of Education should publish the data that it already collects on the number of students at each school who default over the lifetime of their loans. At the moment, it only releases the number who default during the first two years after leaving college, which is of limited value, not only because this is such a short time span, but also because the rates can be easily manipulated by schools.

Just publishing lifetime default rates would give prospective students a clearer picture of the risks of enrolling in a particular school. But the impact would be far greater if Congress used this data, along with graduation rates, to weed out abusive institutions; ideally, any school that failed to meet a certain threshold should be kicked out of the federal financial aid programs.

At the same time, Congress should require companies that offer private student loans to give the same kinds of flexible repayment options and consumer protections as are available through the federal student loan program, including allowing borrowers to repay their loans as a percentage of their income. Lawmakers also need to revisit changes Congress made to the bankruptcy code in 2005, which make it exceeding difficult for financially distressed borrowers, including those with private student loans, to discharge their debt in bankruptcy.

These changes would go a long way toward helping people like Martine Leveque escape their mountains of debt and ensuring that future students don't wind up in the same situation. It would also guarantee that taxpayers don't go on bankrolling giant companies that profit by exploiting those who are struggling to build better lives. WM

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Windmills, Revisited

The once and future mission of the *Washington Monthly*.

By Nicholas Lemann

I reported for duty at the *Washington Monthly* on July 1, 1976. For the magazine, it was a time of economic distress (nothing new there) and psychological glee. Jimmy Carter, by then the certain Democratic nominee for president, was an actual subscriber to the *Monthly*, meaning that every year a renewal check came in drawn on his personal bank account and signed by him. And he had just hired one of the magazine's alumni, James Fallows, as his chief speechwriter. To Charlie Peters, the *Monthly*'s founder, owner, and editor, it was clear that we were now going to be listened to. The previous year, Saul Bellow's novel *Humboldt's Gift* had been published, and my conversations with Charlie that summer and fall reminded me distinctly of Bellow's renditions of the fevered conversations between Von Humboldt Fleisher and his protégé Charlie Citrine about the coming glories of the Adlai Stevenson administration.

Everybody in Washington dreams of having a new president's ear, but in the case of a political magazine the dream is usually highly particular: the program the magazine was founded to advocate will become at least an important part of the new administration's thinking. This may have happened for, say, *National Review* or *Commentary* in the Reagan administration, but it did not happen for the *Monthly* in the Carter administration. I watched Charlie's hope turn inexorably into a hurt disappointment.

It's hard, thirty years later, to recapture that moment, but it's worth doing because it helps bring a larger point about the *Monthly*, and about political magazines, and about liberalism, into focus. In those days, in Dupont Circle circles, President Carter was suspiciously right-wing, Ralph Nader was the Establishment, and it was unimaginable that Ronald Reagan was on the verge of being elected president. Although the *Washington Monthly* had published its first issue, in 1969, in the aftermath of a Republican victory in a presidential election, it had been a very close election; it was nowhere in Charlie's thinking that, as he was planning his new magazine, he was witnessing the beginning of a string of seven wins and three losses by the Republicans in presidential politics.

The *Monthly* was a direct descendent of the Peace Corps' department of evaluation, which Charlie had founded and run. It was imbued with the Peace Corps' liberal, reformist spirit, but it also had the reality-testing ethos of Charlie's evaluators: the writers were supposed to go out in the field and report back, unsentimentally and truthfully, on whether government programs were working or not. The *Public Interest*, founded at around the same time by a group of writers who soon began calling themselves neoconservatives, had a similar mission, but in its case the tough-minded examination of government programs' effectiveness was supposed to be more social scientific. The *Monthly*, methodologically, was always reportorial, and it was never conservative—but, when I joined the magazine, the other editorial employee besides me and Charlie was Tom Bethell, an actual conservative, and it seemed as if the magazine devoted its main energies to attacking conventional liberal positions. When I first came to the magazine's office for my job interview in the winter of 1976, I was amazed to see an issue just back from the printer's with the cover line "CRIMINALS BELONG IN JAIL." Charlie thought we would purify liberalism, the naturally dominant strain in American politics since his New Deal childhood in West Virginia, by relentlessly ridding it of tired, automatic bromides and by insisting that liberals see government's performance as it actually was, not as liberals wished it to be. He wanted to understand and call attention to government's failures so that in the future it would work properly, not so that people would stop believing government could solve problems. Nonetheless, issue by issue, this entailed criticizing liberals more often than conservatives.

The *Monthly* was always hard to classify. It investigated, but it wasn't exactly investigative in the traditional sense, because its main interest was not in catching officials breaking the law but in understanding why, without being corrupt, government agencies didn't get the job done. It was reformist, but it lacked the patrician hostility to democratic politics that has often characterized good-government reformers. It was not conventionally liberal, but it wasn't centrist, moderate, or pro-business in the manner of the Democratic Leadership Council, which was founded in the 1980s. It wanted liberal politicians to hold the policymaking reins, but, at least in the early years, it almost never published articles proposing winning polit-

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ical strategies for its side. It was interested in policy, but it mainly eschewed traditional policy analysis. It was interested in ideas, but—in contradistinction to the *Public Interest* crowd, as its views developed—it was far more interested in facts on the ground.

Still, to Charlie's mind all the disparate aspects of the magazine's concerns were beginning to cohere into a worldview. Anyway, political magazines are supposed to be associated with movements, not merely to consider everything that happens on a case-by-case basis. So Charlie began promoting the word "neoliberal" as a rubric that captured what the *Monthly* stood for.

That the magazine is now forty years old and has outlived many of its early peers is testament to the incredible determination and passion of Charlie and his successor, Paul Glastris. Its history is a generally happy one, punctuated by regular financial crises. There is, however, one great cruel irony hovering over the *Monthly*'s institutional life, which is that "neoliberal" has failed spectacularly as the name for the magazine's ideology. That term has gone into common usage all over the world—but it is always used pejoratively, and with a meaning attached (free markets can solve all social problems) that has no point of intersection with Charlie's idea of neoliberalism.

Years ago the magazine held a conference on neoliberalism, at which I remember somebody in the audience standing up and asking, "What's the constituency?" None of us had an answer. Indeed, we found the question offensive. Weren't we right? Wasn't that enough? Haven't all three Democrats elected president during the magazine's lifetime been neoliberals in the *Washington Monthly*/positive (rather than the *London Review of Books*/negative) sense? But over the years, the magazine has gradually come to see conservatism more as something it is opposed to, and, especially under Glastris's editorship, beginning at the start of George W. Bush's presidency, has devoted more of its editorial energies to suggesting ways for liberals to succeed electorally. That, it turns out, is the necessary precondition to the *Monthly*'s original project of figuring out how to make specific government policies and agencies work effectively to help ordinary people who need it.

The failure of neoliberalism as a label means that, at forty, for all its achievements, the *Monthly* not only has a mission to perform, but also has some work to do in defining what its mission is. What is unquestionable is that the magazine's core activity from the beginning, evaluating the performance of government, is still something the world badly needs. The *Monthly* has always complained that too few journalists were assigned to cover government; today, because of the economic woes of newspapers and television, the number is surely lower than it was forty years ago. And all those Republican presidents did not, in fact, meaningfully shrink government (that's one reason why they were elected and reelected). George W. Bush started two enormous and consequential government programs, No Child Left Behind and the Medicare prescription drug benefit. How well do they work? Do you know? This is the kind of work the *Monthly* was, quite literally, born to do.

But the other, and evolutionarily next, aspect of the magazine's project is just as important. The liberal electoral successes of the Clinton and Obama years have been fragile, and they have not been associated with a strong, coherent set of ideas to the same extent as the conservative successes of the Reagan and Bush years. A century ago, intellectuals like Herbert Croly, Walter Lippmann, Jane Addams, and John Dewey helped define what liberalism meant in the twentieth century. In the twenty-first century thus far, we haven't developed a similarly significant liberal template. Liberalism can and should concern itself with finding winning electoral strategies, but it also needs ideas that fit together into a larger whole. A great deal of liberal thinking over the past generation has consisted of making concessions to conservatism on issues like the size and efficacy of government, the effectiveness of the Cold War, the virtues of markets, and the importance of civil society. As a result, at this moment, conservatism stands for big ideas (in ways that have largely played themselves out) and liberalism does not.

Small, struggling political magazines make for excellent laboratories for the formulation of governing philosophies. The *Washington Monthly*'s particular interest in the effectiveness (or not) of government gives it an ideal body of material from which to extrapolate to larger ideas.

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The work of pointing out the flaws in conventional mid-twentieth-century liberalism is largely complete. So is the work of pointing out the flaws in Reagan-era conservatism. Figuring out what comes next—even though we probably shouldn't call it neoliberalism—is as pressing a task as figuring out which government programs work and which don't. WM

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THE BEST OF THE *WASHINGTON MONTHLY*

In the pages that follow you will find a selection of writing that spans the near entirety of the Washington Monthly*'s history—from roughly the beginning of Nixon's first term to the beginning of George W. Bush's second. The pieces showcase much of what we like best about our magazine. They are never quite on the headlines, instead running presciently ahead or following thoughtfully behind. Important people and events are seen through unconventional lenses. We view the post–civil rights era racial struggles from a poker table in rural Georgia, the fraying of the American social fabric through a home shopping network, and Bill Clinton through the eyes of his neighbors in Harlem. Rather than looking at a senator's struggle for election, we focus on the way the machinery of Washington makes his job a farce once he's seated. Many of the stories we selected for this section tap individual experiences, often painful ones, and therefore say something above and beyond their immediate subjects—they feel not just right, but true.*

That said, many of our favorite pieces didn't make the cut. Partly this was a matter of formal constraint: articles that unspool over many pages often have a magic that cannot be conveyed when cut down to a fraction of their original length. It is also the case that much of the work we are proudest of—our muckraking, reportage, and manifestos—are necessarily bound to their specific time and place.

Indeed, we found that many great Monthly *pieces have a curious half-life: they were groundbreaking when published, but also correct enough that conventional wisdom eventually caught up with them. Hence, many stories didn't make it into this anniversary issue through no fault of their own. To help fill the gaps, we've peppered the section with a sort of running scorecard for the magazine: a roundup of the things we nailed before everyone else, and the things we blew entirely.*

We hope you enjoy reading these fruits of our archives as much as we enjoyed picking them. —The Editors

JAMES BOYD ON LIFE IN CONGRESS

The great irony of Congress is that the men and women we send to Washington to make policy spend only a fraction of their time actually doing that. Former Senate staffer James Boyd captured the absurdity of the situation in the magazine's first issue, imagining a day in the life of a hypothetical senator.

The senator starts his typical day tired. He returned very late last night from a speech back home, and he had to get up early this morning to present himself at a breakfast sponsored by utility executives. ("These guys come here mostly for a good time, but to make it look official, they nail me for an hour when I can't claim a conflicting engagement.") In the gray light of the cab he gives his *New York Times* a ten-minute reading, hoping that his aides will let him know if anything important happened yesterday. The breakfast is a bore, naturally, but he hopes he convinced those Republican businessmen that he is one Democrat who understands their problems.

He arrives at his office at 9:30, already thirty minutes late, grousing to himself about the three hurried minutes it takes to get down the long corridor. ("After another term, I'll be better situated.") He goes in through his private door, so visitors won't see him. He has the usual committee meeting scheduled at ten o'clock, and he remembers that yesterday he tried to accommodate his legislative assistant by agreeing to be briefed for half an hour on everything under consideration by the committee.

But a check confirms his suspicion: his waiting room is crowded with people he can't ignore. He apologizes to his assistant and tells his secretary to "run them in." One of them helped him in an election back in the dim past. ("He just wants to say hello and show his wife that he has entree to a senator's office.") Then there is a delegation of union people who contributed to his campaign last time. They want to let him know they are watching what he does on that compulsory arbitration bill.

GOOD CALL

PRYING EYES

The *Washington Monthly* celebrated the first anniversary of its debut with a bang: an exposé by former U.S. Army Intelligence Officer Christopher H. Pyle detailing the Army's heretofore unknown domestic surveillance programs. For four years, Pyle explained in "CONUS Intelligence" (January 1970), the Army had been keeping tabs on the lawful activities of American political activists, ranging from civil rights leaders to white supremacists to antiwar groups. "What is perhaps most remarkable about this domestic intelligence network is its potential for growth," he wrote, warning that if lawmakers and the public didn't demand accountability, the United States could end up hosting "the largest domestic intelligence operation outside of the communist world."

In fact, much of that operation was already in place. Pyle's *Monthly* story—which won a George Polk Award—was the first in a series of shocking revelations about domestic spying in the Vietnam era. In 1971 news of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's now-infamous COINTELPRO operation came to light, followed by disclosure of similar Central Intelligence Agency activities in 1974. The ensuing Church Committee investigation ultimately led to the kind of congressional intelligence oversight that Pyle had argued was necessary.

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By now the hearing has started. But there are more constituents, or self-proclaimed representatives of constituents, to be seen. He greets them, one after another, listens, nodding agreeably for a few minutes, and turns them over to his executive aides. But he worries. He gets a lot of votes by helping constituents, and this service is one of his major assets during campaigns. He knows it takes up half the time of his staff, time that he needs for help on the issues. And besides, even though he helps these people, he knows that most of the things they ask are wrong or antithetical to the public interest.

If a call from his office to the Veterans Administration causes the disability file of John Jones to be pulled from the middle of the pile and placed on top, it only means that all the others are set back one. Jones doesn't care about the others, of course, and the others won't find out, but it's a funny way to run a country. It is past eleven o'clock when he gets to the committee hearing. During the walk over, his legislative assistant gives him a hurried, capsule briefing, just enough to confuse him. In the hearing he asks the wrong questions. So do other senators who come and go every few minutes. The questions that get to the heart of the matter are so rare as to seem accidental, and the needed follow-up question is almost never asked. By ten minutes of 12:00 he has picked up the thread, but it's time to get to the Senate floor to insert into the Congressional Record a number of press releases just handed him by his head speechwriter. ("If I get there late, I'll be late for lunch with my campaign finance chairman. He can't be kept waiting.")

There are two afternoon committee sessions. He goes to the one that's being televised. As for the other, a closed session where legislation is being drafted, he sends his proxy to the chairman. By four o'clock he leaves the televised hearing (the camera has been shut off) to have his picture taken on the Capitol steps with a high school class from back home. Afterward he takes them into the Senate Reception Room, makes a little speech, shakes hands, and presents each visitor with an embossed ballpoint pen. ("They'll all be voters in three or four years, and their parents are voters now.")

He is late for his 4:30 appointment at NASA, but he knows that the top men there will wait for a senator. ("Come to think of it, why didn't I have the meeting scheduled in my own office?") He is accompanied by businessmen from his state who are bidding for a government contract. The meeting is mercifully short. ("I loused up my presentation, but I gave them that I'll-remember-at-appropriation-time look and I don't think they'll give me the runaround again.") Lobbying for businessmen eats up his time in great chunks. He sometimes feels that he is forever appearing before a regulatory commission or testifying before the Senate Appropriations Committee at the behest of some business or other.

Back in the office at 5:45 for some paperwork—but his secretary hands him a list of twenty phone calls that must be returned. He picks out six from the array of home-state politicians, reporters, and contributors; he turns the rest over to his administrative assistant. He finishes the calls at 6:30 and asks his staff in. They have been waiting for a crack at him all day on matters they think are urgent. But those matters must wait; today is the last day he can name his state's quota to West Point. Awash in papers, he starts trying to balance the grades of boys he doesn't know against the recommendations of people he owes favors. He finally scribbles the prescribed number of names, and that's that.

By now his aides can tell from his gray countenance that he is bushed, so they don't press him for decisions. Everyone has a drink or two, the talk is pleasant and general, and gradually the chief's energy revives. His cleaning is brought in and he changes. He has dinner scheduled tonight with a columnist who has seven outlets in his state. ("I'd better not have that third drink.") And after that, he has promised to take his wife to an embassy party.

He hates the thought of it, but he hasn't seen her for three nights, and tomorrow night he will be speaking for a $1,500 fee in Pennsylvania. ("She's always telling me how tired I look and how I ought to slow down and get some rest, but she sure likes those parties.") Maybe when he gets home, around midnight, he'll take an hour to dig into his briefcase, to read that material on the population explosion, on a new idea for housing in the ghetto, on the missile defense system, on the currency crisis, on the nuclear proliferation treaty. Yes, he's been trying to get to that briefcase for days.

From "Legislate? Who, Me?" February 1969. James Boyd is now retired and living in Virginia.

TAYLOR BRANCH ON RACE IN THE SOUTH

In the summer of 1969, Taylor Branch took a job registering rural black voters in his home state of Georgia. He kept a diary of his experiences, which he later turned into a Washington Monthly *article detailing how the gains of the civil rights*

BAD CALL

THE WE DECADE?

As the 1970s drew to a close and Americans prepared to bid farewell to a decade that had begun in hope and hippiedom and ended in cynicism and polyester, *Washington Monthly* founding editor Charles Peters unleashed "A Platform for the Nineteen-Eighties" (February 1979), a thirteen-page manifesto calling on Americans to make the 1980s a new era of idealism. Peters wanted to put an end to "the politics of selfishness"; he argued that mediation should replace lawsuits, national service should be mandatory, and corporate greed should give way to labors of love. The '80s, he declared, would be a time for Americans to come together and shed their lavish lifestyles. Alas, Gordon Gekko wasn't a *Monthly* subscriber.

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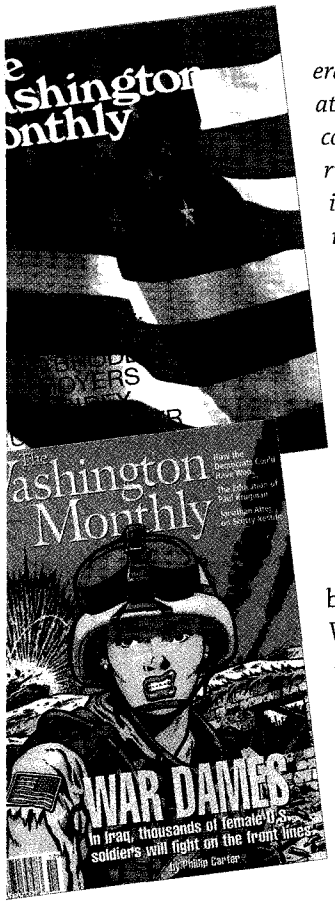

era were being systematically undermined by corrupt police in the rural South. The experience also sparked the idea for Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954–63, *Branch's Pulitzer Prize–winning narrative history of the civil rights movement.*

"All right, get the money off the table," said Bubba-doo Wiggins, the proprietor of the Big Apple in Cuthbert, Georgia, as he jumped from his perch with a can of Colt 45 and a fistful of house-cut dollars. In what resembled the routine panic of a grammar school fire drill, he herded all the card players across the hall into a small closet on the mysterious side of the shack. The younger people scattered. The white man, a graduate student visiting the town, followed the pack, disoriented, and was the last to squeeze into the tiny room.

"What the hell is going on?" he whispered to his fellow loser.

"Beer truck," he replied, obviously amused at the other's perplexity.

Through a crack in the door, the stranger could see Bubba-doo behind the bar. He saw the proprietor put down his Colt 45 to greet two uniformed white men who ambled up and began some small talk.

"Who's that, the sheriff?" whispered the white man to the loser.

"No, the police," he said. "They go around with the beer truck every Friday."

The screen door closed again, and a rotund white man soon came into view, wheeling a half-dozen cases of beer up to the bar. He was wearing a Schlitz uniform and smoking a cigar. He left for another load.

Bubba-doo soon rapped on the door with the all-clear sign, and the poker players tumbled out into the hallway. The white man ran to a window in time to watch the beer truck stir up the red dust, with the police car right behind.

Unfortunately, the poker game had evaporated. As the others filed past on their way home for supper, the stranger decided that their interest in him was directly related to whether or not his pockets were full.

"No more game here, man," observed his fellow loser.

The two losers walked across the room, past the jukebox, and out onto the Big Apple's front porch, where the strains of a twilight hymn from the revival floated on the summer air.

"Whatchew doing down here in niggertown?" came a voice from the police car, which had drifted back down the road, evidently having finished its beer run.

"Sir?"

"I said whatchew doing down here in niggertown?"

"I'm, you know, I'm doing a manpower survey for the university. Uh, I'm seeing about the kind of jobs these people have around here."

"You what?" The stranger walked down the steps and over to the passenger side of the police car, experiencing all the physical symptoms of acute fear—shaking, sweating, burning skin, gulping, pounding heart, dry mouth, cold hands, wobbling knees, cloudy, swirling brain.

"You ain't down here trying to stir up our niggers, are you?"

"No, sir."

"We treat our niggers real good around here, so we ain't had no riots or anything, and we aim to keep it that way. Do you know you could get knifed down here easy as that?"

"No, sir," said the accused, looking surprised and hoping that the policeman would take him for a bumbling student, which seemed accurate enough.

* * *

From the white people's point of view, the operation of the law is a distinctly informal business in southwest Georgia. Few local whites are ever arrested, other than a drunk or two, and the main concerns of the law are traffic tickets and the maintenance of calm among the black people. Neither task draws much attention from most white people, and keeping the lid on the black parts of town seems so easy that it produces boredom.

If policemen seem rather overlooked by the white people, the Negroes act in compensation, for black people see them as the symbol of white power. The policeman represents more than violence or the fact that whites inevitably win any interracial legal battle. The man who rose from the pool room to the police car symbolizes the unpredictability of law enforcement for blacks. Lacking the restraint and formality of schoolbook law, he uses his badge as he sees fit and is often governed by an ornery mood.

* * *

The farcical tragedy of law and order in the black belt lies in the exclusion of black people from even a sniff of fairness. Enforced lines of discrimination still separate balcony from ground floor in theaters and courtrooms, front from back in laundromats, and white from black in hospitals. The hospitals of small counties are bastions of segregation, and the towns are rife with tales of bed switching or employees' jumping into beds when the inspectors come. One clinic has survived such inspections without indoor toilets for black patients, who must walk two hundred yards to the outhouse or have relatives there to handle bedpans. The sanitation facilities are generally indicative of the quality of care in that institution.

A black man may walk into the restaurant only to pass the waitress on her way to tell the police that he has "made advances" toward her; and sometimes he may sit down to wait futilely for service or to find that the prices are triple those on the menu and the portions microscopic. Faced with an infinite variety of such obstacles, local black people usually take their food through the ubiquitous side window.

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Black subordination in the public realm has crucial ramifications in all areas of racial contact, for blacks have no avenue of recompense for wrongs against them—whether by a restaurant owner or an individual white man. Moreover, they have no means of seeking outside assistance even if they wish to brave its hazards. They find themselves in helpless equilibrium: the local predicament of black people incapacitates them from birth, and incapacitated people are rendered unable to seek outside help even if it is available.

Only 30 percent of the eligible black people in southwest Georgia are registered to vote—primarily because people are paralyzed with fear. This fear, in turn, depends upon the most devastating forms of personal discrimination. Acute fear is itself a measure of the absence of law and order, almost by definition.

From "Black Fear," January 1970. Taylor Branch's most recent book is The Clinton Tapes: Wrestling History With the President.

JAMES FALLOWS ON THE DRAFT

Six months after the last American troops left Saigon, Washington Monthly *contributing editor James Fallows revisited his experience with the draft as a Harvard undergraduate for an essay on how the Vietnam War had deepened America's class divide. Fallows argued that while privileged young men like him believed at the time that they were fighting the war machine by escaping military service on technicalities, such draft deferments actually prolonged the conflict by lowering the stakes for the elites who could have actually done something to stop it—which was why the Johnson administration quietly but deliberately allowed them. The class divisions that determined who did and didn't fight in Vietnam, Fallows warned, would haunt America for years to come.*

In the fall of 1969, I was beginning my final year in college. As the months went by, the rock on which I had unthinkingly anchored my hopes—the certainty that the war in Vietnam would be over before I could possibly fight—began to crumble. It shattered altogether on Thanksgiving weekend when, while riding back to Boston from a visit with my relatives, I heard that the draft lottery had been held and my birthdate had come up number 45. I recognized for the first time that, inflexibly, I must either be drafted or consciously find a way to prevent it.

In the atmosphere of that time, each possible choice came equipped with barbs. To answer the call was unthinkable, not only because, in my heart, I was desperately afraid of being killed, but also because, among my friends, it was axiomatic that one should not be "complicit" in the immoral war effort. Draft resistance, the course chosen by a few noble heroes of the movement, meant going to prison or leaving the country. With much the same intensity with which I wanted to stay alive, I did not want those things either. What I wanted was to go to graduate school, to get married, and to enjoy those bright prospects I had been taught that life owed me.

I learned quickly enough that there was only one way to get what I wanted. A physical deferment would restore things to the happy state I had known during four undergraduate years. The barbed alternatives would be put off. By the impartial dictates of public policy I would be free to pursue the better side of life.

Like many of my friends whose numbers had come up wrong in the lottery, I set about securing my salvation. When I was not participating in antiwar rallies, I was poring over the Army's code of physical regulations. During the winter and early spring, seminars were held in the college common rooms. There, sympathetic medical students helped us search for disqualifying conditions that we, in our many years of good health, might have overlooked. Although, on the doctors' advice, I made a halfhearted try at fainting spells, my only real possibility was beating the height and weight regulations. My normal weight was close to the cutoff point for an "underweight" disqualification, and, with a diligence born of panic, I made sure I would have a margin. I was six feet one inch tall at the time. On the morning of the draft physical I weighed 120 pounds.

Before sunrise that morning I rode the subway to the Cambridge city hall, where we had been told to gather for shipment to the examination at the Boston Navy Yard. The examinations were administered on a rotating basis, one or two days each month for each of the draft boards in the area. Virtually everyone who showed up on Cambridge day at the Navy Yard was a student from Harvard or MIT.

There was no mistaking the political temperament of our group. Many of my friends wore red armbands and stop-the-war buttons. Most chanted the familiar words, "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh / NLF is gonna win." One of the things we had learned from the draft

GOOD CALL

HOUSTON, WE HAVE A PROBLEM

Three decades ago, when NASA engineers were still hammering away on the space shuttle *Columbia*, the first in a planned fleet of reusable cosmic cruisers, the *Washington Monthly*'s Gregg Easterbrook took a long hard look at the burgeoning space exploration program. He discovered the shuttles were fraught with safety problems—the cover of the issue begged, "Beam Us Out of This Deathtrap, Scotty!"

In "The Spruce Goose of Outer Space" (April 1980), Easterbrook flagged two particular areas of concern. One was the vulnerability of the booster rockets, the flaming, 15-million-horsepower pillars of steel that propelled the shuttle during liftoff. "Suppose one of the solid-fueled boosters failed," he wrote. "The plan is, you die." The other was the heat-shielding tiles that lined the outside of the shuttle—they were fragile and impossible to fix in space, and if they failed the shuttle would burn up on reentry. Tragically, these were the exact two failures that doomed the *Challenger* in 1986 and the *Columbia*—the source of Easterbrook's initial concerns—in 2003.

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counselors was that disruptive behavior at the examination was a worthwhile political goal, not only because it obstructed the smooth operation of the criminal war machine, but also because it might impress the examiners with our undesirable character traits. As we climbed into the buses, and as they rolled toward the Navy Yard, about half of the young men brought the chants to a crescendo. The rest of us sat rigid and silent, clutching X-rays and letters from our doctors at home.

Inside the Navy Yard, we were first confronted by a young sergeant from Long Beach, a former surfer boy no older than the rest of us and seemingly unaware that he had an unusual situation on his hands. He started reading out instructions for the intelligence tests when he was hooted down. He went out to collect his lieutenant, who clearly had been through a Cambridge day before. "We've got all the time in the world," he said, and let the chanting go on for two or three minutes. "When we're finished with you, you can go, and not a minute before."

From that point on the disruption became more purposeful and individual, largely confined to those whose deferment strategies were based on antiauthoritarian psychiatric traits. Twice I saw students walk up to the young orderlies—whose hands were extended to receive the required cup of urine—and throw the vial in the orderlies' faces. The orderlies looked up, initially more astonished than angry, and went back to towel themselves off. Most of the rest of us trod quietly through the paces, waiting for the moment of confrontation when the final examiner would give his verdict. I had stepped on the scales at the very beginning of the examination. Desperate at seeing the orderly write down 122 pounds, I hopped back on and made sure that he lowered it to 120. I walked in a trance through the rest of the examination, until the final meeting with the fatherly physician who ruled on marginal cases such as mine. I stood there in socks and underwear, arms wrapped around me in the chilly building. I knew as I looked at the doctor's face that he understood exactly what I was doing.

"Have you ever contemplated suicide?" he asked after he finished looking over my chart. My eyes darted up to his. "Oh, suicide—yes, I've been feeling very unstable and unreliable recently." He looked at me, staring until I returned my eyes to the ground. He wrote "unqualified" on my folder, turned on his heel, and left. I was overcome by a wave of relief, which for the first time revealed to me how great my terror had been, and by the beginning of the sense of shame which remains with me to this day.

It was, initially, a generalized shame at having gotten away with my deception, but it came into sharper focus later in the day. Even as the last of the Cambridge contingent was throwing its urine and deliberately failing its color-blindness tests, buses from the next board began to arrive. These bore the boys from Chelsea, thick, dark-haired young men, the white proles of Boston. Most of them were younger than us, since they had just left high school, and it had clearly never occurred to them that there might be a way around the draft. They walked through the examination lines like so many cattle off to slaughter. I tried to avoid noticing, but the results were inescapable. While perhaps four out of five of my friends from Harvard were being deferred, just the opposite was happening to the Chelsea boys.

We returned to Cambridge that afternoon, not in government buses but as free individuals, liberated and victorious. The talk was high-spirited, but there was something close to the surface that none of us wanted to mention. We knew now who would be killed.

From "What Did You Do in the Class War, Daddy?" October 1975. James Fallows is now a national correspondent for the Atlantic.

BAD CALL

FUTURE NOT FOUND

In the early 1980s, personal computers were making the transition from curious novelty to household mainstay, and *Washington Monthly* contributing editor Gregg Easterbrook correctly envisioned a future in which they would play an ever-more-intimate role in our lives. Unfortunately, Easterbrook also predicted that by the end of the '80s computers, equipped with sophisticated voice synthesizers and programmed for empathy, would have largely replaced human companionship. "For the lonely and the overly intellectual of this generation and others to follow," Easterbrook wrote in "The Heart of a New Machine" (March 1983), "computers could be the main agents of comfort and consolation."

While this was a fairly accurate anticipation of the 1985 John Hughes classic *Weird Science*, the closest most PC users ever got to a silicon-based soulmate was Microsoft Word's annoying cartoon paper clip. In fact, since the advent of the Internet the main social function of computers has been to connect people, not replace us.

ARTHUR LEVINE ON WOODWARD AND BERNSTEIN

In 1976, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein published The Final Days, *their account of the last months of the Nixon presidency. While Woodward and Bernstein were heroes to a generation of idealistic young journalists,* Washington Monthly *contributing editor Arthur Levine couldn't help noticing that* The Final Days *was larded with flattering portrayals of cooperative sources. How, Levine wondered, might Woodward and Bernstein have approached a history of another notable administration?*

This was an extraordinary mission. Reichsmarshal Hermann Goering and Heinrich Himmler, the Gestapo chief, settled in for the two-hour train trip to Berchtesgaden. The two sensitive and brilliant aides were leaving behind a hot, sunny Munich. It was September 15, 1943. Ahead of them lay the mountains and lakes of western Germany and Austria. The sun poured

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in at a forty-seven-degree angle through the windows. For most of the travelers, the trip was an occasion for relaxation, a brief respite from the war. Yet these two public servants were not in a holiday mood.

Goering and Himmler had heard rumors that the Führer was anti-Semitic. It was all hearsay, innuendo, but still, the two men were troubled. They had reached an inescapable conclusion: they must go to Berchtesgaden, confront the Führer with these allegations, and ask him to put all doubts to rest.

As the train moved through western Germany, the amiable, flamboyant Goering mused about his own attitudes toward the Jewish people. He tapped his engraved swastika ring on the armrest as he recalled his lifelong admiration for the Jews. A plump, avuncular man with a fondness for expensive paintings, Goering had many Jewish friends from his days as a World War I air force hero. He kept up his contacts after he joined the National Socialist German Worker's Party ("Nazis") in the 1920s. The Jews, Goering thought, were bright, hard-working, patriotic.

Goering was well equipped to judge the finer qualities of man. As president of the Reichstag, then as air minister and founder of the Gestapo, Goering had impressed associates with his willingness to work long hours and his insider's knowledge of the bureaucracy. He was tough, shrewd, and loyal. Goering was an aesthete and an elegant dresser. With his lacquered fingernails and green velvet capes, he cut an impressive figure at the Reichschancellery.

As the pastoral scene outside sped by their windows, Himmler and Goering were in a reflective mood. "You know, Heinrich," Goering said, twirling his three-foot gold baton, "lately I sure miss having my close Jewish friends around to talk to. There used to be so many of them, and now I can't seem to get them on the phone anymore. Where have they gone?"

"Beats me, Hermann," Himmler answered. He tugged absentmindedly on his lapels with their provocative death's-head insignia. A fly hovered two inches above the windowsill. Goering moved over to crush it, but Himmler reached out instinctively to grab his hand. "Don't do that, Herman!" Himmler exclaimed. "All life is sacred, down to the lowliest animal in God's creation." The two men lapsed into silence for seventy-two seconds. Finally, Goering asked, "Have you heard anything about these so-called concentration camps?"

Not really, Himmler said. Rumors here and there, but nothing solid, no firm evidence. They must ask the Führer about them.

Yes, Goering said, that was a good idea.

When they arrived at Hitler's chalet, the two men were led through a living room that was sixty feet long and fifty feet wide, with Italian paintings and Gobelin tapestries hanging on the walls. The soft-spoken Martin Bormann, often called the conscience of the Reichschancellery, greeted them in the anteroom outside Hitler's office. He was reading a travel guide to Argentina when they came in.

"I'm so glad you could come here," Bormann said, adjusting his argyle socks. The Führer, Bormann said, had been withdrawn and uncommunicative, making decisions in isolation. He had been in this mood for at least five years, maybe more.

Bormann felt he didn't really know the Führer. His decisions were unpredictable: one day, silence; the next day, they invaded Russia. It was eerie.

Goering and Himmler were finally led into Hitler's office. The Führer was seated at his desk, drinking a Löwenbräu. He looked pale and exhausted. He had not been sleeping well. He had been troubled by the defeat at Stalingrad, the Allied landing in Italy, the fall of Africa. Events were closing in on him.

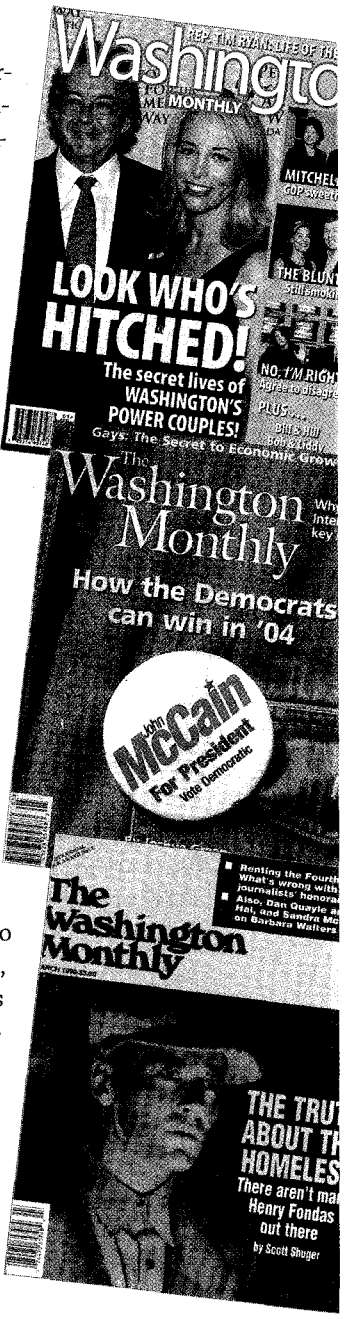
"The Jews, mein Führer, what's happened to all the Jews?" Goering asked. "There used to be so many of them."

"I'm dying to find out," Hitler said, winking broadly. "Get it?" He collapsed with laughter, then composed himself.

Himmler was disturbed. The Führer was not being very cooperative in dispelling any lingering doubts. Finally, he asked point-blank: "Mein Führer, what are your true feelings about the Jewish people?"

Hitler exploded. "I don't give a shit how you do it, just get rid of them. That's the plan." The two men greeted these remarks with a disappointed silence. There was not much room for maneuvering here. It could be a problem.

They kept their concerns to themselves, however. They did not wish to add to the Führer's burdens. Standing up to leave, Himmler said, "Thanks for giving us fresh insights into your views on the Jewish people." The three men shook hands, and Himmler and Goering simultaneously realized how little they really knew the Führer, even after all these years.



From "The Final Days of the Third Reich, As Told to Woodward and Bernstein," September 1976. Arthur Levine is now a freelance writer, and blogs for In These Times *and* Huffington Post.

TIMOTHY NOAH ON THE BABY BOOMERS

The year 1983 saw the release of The Big Chill, *a film that capitalized on the early waves of baby boomer nostalgia with the story of a group of thirtysomething friends looking back upon their '60s youth.* Wash-

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ington Monthly *editor Timothy Noah—born on the tail end of the baby boom, which missed the sixties—took aim at the film's smug generational narcissism, and offered a broader critique of the boomers' middle-aged retreat from idealism.*

Even those of us who weren't invited to the party must concede that there was something unique about the sixties. The intensely felt experience of either opposing or fighting in the Vietnam War, the exuberant optimism among those who wanted to create racial and economic equality, and the general feeling of high-spirited nonconformity all served to define a group of people whose common values set them apart from and—at their best—above the narcissism and grim conformity of the 1950s and the 1970s.

But now that the sixties are over and the members of that generation are looking toward middle age, the bonds that remain among them have taken on an unattractive quality that sometimes makes me glad I *wasn't* invited to the party. For too many veterans of that decade, the litmus test of political idealism—and, in a larger sense, virtue—has come to be not what you do, or even what you believe, but when you were born. In this view, the Woodstock generation doesn't have to grapple with the issues of today's larger political community because, unlike the benighted souls who came before and after, it earned its stripes in the political battles of the sixties. This sustains a feeling of commitment that is curiously apolitical. The idea seems to be that if the world doesn't seem a much better place now that the college students of the sixties have assumed adult responsibilities, then, dammit, it's the world's fault, or perhaps the fault of adulthood itself. It certainly isn't theirs. And if the children of the sixties don't like the world as they now find it, then the answer the generational view sets forth is not to make it better; rather, it is to retreat to the companionship of one's fellow thirty-five-year-olds, among whom can be found a smaller, more exclusive society where some of the old attitudes and customs still reign. As the advertisements for the movie *The Big Chill* put it, "In a cold world you need your friends to keep you warm."

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The idea that membership in a particular age group was a precondition to enlightenment has always been one of the more unattractive doctrines of the sixties generation. During the sixties, when the object of exclusionary sentiment was the older generation, "youth culture" consciousness was but one shrill note among many more melodious ones. Now that the political turmoil has subsided, however, generational chauvinism, now directed against the young, has become practically the whole symphony.

Thus when Abbie Hoffman recently turned forty-seven, he declared that "watching college students today is about as exciting as watching TV bowling" and vowed that he would "never trust anybody under 30." A cloying new television series, *Family Ties*, has appeared, presumably the brainchild of someone in his thirties, about a family where the parents are ex–flower children and their son is—you guessed it—a stuffed-shirt right-winger. Indeed, it is nearly impossible to find in any of the popular-culture depictions of the Woodstock culture grown up a sympathetic portrait of anyone under thirty, while there are plenty of damning ones. The function of this generational chauvinism against the under-thirty crowd is to provide a cover for the Woodstock generation's own seductions during the Me Decade. Sure, we may be career oriented and narcissistic, but we're not as bad as the kids who never got the chance to experience the fleeting brush with campus radicalism.

• • •

The larger problem with allowing people to go strutting around saying they're superior because they're thirty-five is that it encourages them to regard the larger bonds of community with an informality that society can ill afford. SEC regulations may not get violated very often in the name of sixties solidarity, but the world does seem to be populated with quite a few members of the sixties generation who think there's nothing inconsistent about being both an ex-radical and, say, a tax lawyer who now contrives to minimize the contributions of our richest citizens to the Treasury—so long as you treat your job with the proper amount of contempt. The key is to draw your real sense of worth from your membership in the Woodstock generation. The irony of this stance is that where once it sought to create a "relevant," alternative culture, now it serves to create a deliberately *irrelevant* one. And where once such distinctions were made in the name of politicizing previously neutral questions, now they are made to *depoliticize* them.

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Where the sixties idea of community went wrong was in its failure to keep alive the idea that community should exist to make the world a better place, and not merely to reinforce already strong bonds between people of the same age. The kind of community that the Woodstock generation needs to be calling for should not be the kind of community that comes easily—where attitudes and ex-

GOOD CALL

DELICATE INSTRUMENTS

On January 23, 1987, the Dow suffered a sudden drop, plummeting more than 100 points in just over an hour. The market quickly recovered, and most of Wall Street treated it as an odd blip. But in "Futures Shock" (March 1987), *Washington Monthly* editor Steven Waldman argued that the cause of the drop deserved more attention: the computerized "program trading" of stock index futures. The new technology and financial instruments were a boon for individual investors, Waldman argued, but they opened the door to systemic risks in the market as a whole. When international stock exchanges crashed on Black Monday the following October, computerized futures trading was believed to be one of the causes.

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periences are held in common. Instead, it should be calling for the kind of community that you have to work at, forging bonds between people who grew up at different times, in different places, under different circumstances of class and race. It should be a community that is more like a neighborhood, a city, a nation, and less like a class reunion.

From "The Big Massage," February 1984. Timothy Noah is now a senior writer at Slate.

PHILIP WEISS ON STEVEN RATTNER

During the 1980s, bright young people—lured by the promise of enormous salaries and commissions that recent deregulation had made possible—began pouring into the once-stodgy industry of investment banking. Philip Weiss captured this trend and its implications in his 1986 profile of Steven Rattner, a brilliant New York Times *reporter turned investment banker. (Rattner was in the news again recently when he was tapped by President Obama to oversee the bailout of Detroit, but resigned after a brief tenure for personal reasons amid suggestions of impropriety.)*

On a night in August 1982, in a loud New York restaurant off Union Square, Steven Rattner, a London correspondent for the *New York Times*, and Roger Altman, an investment banker at Lehman Brothers, met for dinner to discuss Rattner's future. The two had become good friends a couple of years earlier when Altman was an assistant secretary of the treasury and Rattner was covering Jimmy Carter's economic policy for the *Times*. Now Rattner, at the age of thirty, had decided he wanted to leave journalism.

Rattner was one of the *Times*'s ablest writers. His rise in the organization had been rapid: at twenty-two, clerk to the legendary columnist James Reston; at twenty-three, covering energy, one of the most important stories in the country; at twenty-four, a full member of the Washington bureau; at twenty-nine, a foreign correspondent in a prestige bureau. But by the summer of 1982, Rattner felt he needed a change. It was a good time to become an investment banker. Banking was changing, and Rattner had the personality for its competitive new environment of short-term relationships. His persuasive skills would be useful on deals, Altman told him. Working a client wasn't so different from working a source.

Altman was certainly right about it being a good time for banking. The new spirit of competition brought about by deregulation combined with the rise of a new materialist ethic, especially in Manhattan, had made investment banking glamorous in much the same way that journalism had been in the years after Watergate. Investment bankers and arbitragers were being profiled in mainstream publications like *Esquire* and the *Atlantic*. Radio stations quoted the gold price between rock songs.

But was this the right world for Rattner? As a student at Brown, Rattner had written idealistic editorials proclaiming that the country's moral fiber was "weak" and denouncing "global ... corruption and disdain." It would seem only natural for such a person to wonder aloud whether Lehman Brothers offered avenues for socially useful work. But Altman does not recall that Rattner raised the question of whether investment banking was meaningful work except, he said, "in this sense. He wanted to know whether he'd be fulfilled by banking. Was it overly narrow?" Rattner asked Altman whether investment bankers ever lifted their noses from their spreadsheets. He was a young man who had lived abroad and traveled widely. He had a feeling for good art. Altman assured Rattner that he would meet people who shared his intellectual curiosity and cultivation.

Rattner took the job. Barely a year and a half later he moved to the *New York Times* of investment banking, Morgan Stanley & Company, where in 1985 he brought in a stunning $33 million in fees. After just eighteen months, he was promoted, at age thirty-three, to "principal," a partner who cannot vote on firm policy. The jump usually takes six years. When he left the *Times*, Rattner was earning about $50,000 a year; last year he is said to have made as much as a million. Rattner specializes in deals involving communications companies. Most of his time is devoted to mergers and acquisitions—helping to buy and sell media properties. In some cases, these efforts may have served to compromise the editorial quality of news organizations that, like the *New York Times*, have been known for valuing the product more than the bottom line.

In any age, there are certain people who, because they are both very smart and unusually reactive to their society, help illuminate prevailing values through their actions. Rattner's life seems emblematic of the spirit of the times. Rattner's career path, impressive as it is, has a conformist quality that calls to mind the Woody Allen character Zelig, the "chameleon man" who always took on the coloration of those around him. When journalism defined the spirit and values of a generation, Rattner was a journalist. Now that investment banking defines those things, he is an investment banker. This chame-

GOOD CALL

PRESCIENT.BLOGSPOT.COM

During the 1992 presidential race, the *Washington Monthly*'s Jonathan Alter put his finger on a little-noticed trend: talk shows were eclipsing mainstream news outlets as the public's primary source of information. In "How Phil Donahue Came to Manage the '92 Campaign" (June 1992), Alter predicted that the proliferation of cable news outlets and the advent of the Information Superhighway, or something like it, would further erode the standing of major news organizations, as consumer choices multiplied and barriers to entry in the media business fell. "The whole structure of the media, like that of other institutions, is coming unglued," he wrote. The democratization of information, Alter argued, would "have the potential to redefine power relationships, to further dilute the power of the media elite." Twelve years later, Dan Rather was toppled by a band of bloggers.

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leon quality makes Rattner an instructive case study of the process by which many of today's best and brightest have lost interest in making a difference with their lives.

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Arthur O. Sulzberger, a longtime friend of Rattner's and the (more than likely) future publisher of the *Times*, said Rattner had many layers—implying, as other close friends have, that if I took his banker's bluster at face value I would miss out on his deeper concerns. "He's a very complicated sort of man, with a lot of things going on in his life, some of which he'll let you know about and some of which he won't." After that Sulzberger spoke of the quality of Rattner's mind. Then he broke off and said, "All that intelligence—why doesn't he put it to good use?"

"Are you joking?"

Sulzberger shook his head. He said he teases his friend about the social worth of his work. On one hand he thinks his "moral values" have not changed and it's good to have people in business with a sense of social purpose. On the other hand, as his investment banker friends know, Sulzberger is "troubled" by the values of banking.

He may also be worried that Rattner has started an exodus of *Times* reporters to Wall Street. Last year Michael W. Blumstein, at twenty-nine, left the business desk of the *Times* to become an analyst at First Boston. Blumstein said he had always loved journalism, and even thought he was making a social contribution when he wrote about such corporate maneuvers as "defeasance," a complex way to escape debt. But he didn't feel he could afford to live in Manhattan on an income in the high forties. It also distressed him that by age thirty his salary would be topping out.

When Blumstein finally heeded "the tape" (Wall Street's expression for the direction of the market) and left the *Times*, no one told him he had sold out. "People thought, you're making a smart move for yourself," he said.

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I asked Rattner to compare the social worth of reporting with that of investment banking. He sat back and held the bridge of his nose. "I have two answers," he began. "I guess in the cold light of—No, I don't know if that's true either." It was about the first time he'd faltered that afternoon. He paused, then spoke slowly. "It's something I've thought a lot about. I don't view investment banking as the ultimate social fulfillment to me. I do it because I like what I'm doing. And yet we all do have a responsibility to put something back. Being an investment banker for the last three years has made me realize more what all of us should do. I'm a failure at discharging all my social responsibilities. When you're a journalist, though, you convince yourself of your social usefulness and you don't worry about it. Being an investment banker strips that away. I won't tell you that it is a socially responsible profession, whatever the hell that means, but won't say journalists are either."

Later, he said he often felt that reporters were motivated by the desire for glory and to "hobnob with the great and near great." It's a point to consider. Much as we might want it to, no job confers virtue automatically. What matters is the moral content of our actions in that job. What is troubling about Rattner is that in recognizing that no *profession* is inherently moral, he also seems to have given up on the idea that *individuals* should strive to be useful to society.

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About two years after Steve Rattner's dinner with Roger Altman, Rattner attended a dinner held by James Reston on the eleventh floor of the *Times*. The columnist was turning seventy-five, and he wanted to throw a party for his clerks. Eight tables were set up in the publisher's dining room, but when Reston saw the arrangement he directed that there be one big table, because the clerks were a family.

Fourteen clerks came. Reston ran the show. In his casual way he went around the table, apostrophizing one after another of those present. "And then there was the one who came up to me after a speech in Chapel Hill, with his hands dirty with printers' ink," he said, and everyone understood that he was talking about Jonathan Yardley. Then Yardley took up the conversation and recounted a story about Reston. Reston next got in a dig at Abe Rosenthal about one of Rosenthal's great frustrations, how long it had taken him to get on the foreign desk.

Then it was Rattner's turn. Reston looked down the table in a fatherly way and said, "And then there was the one who left the fold. When are you coming back?"

Rattner defused the tension with a joke, but behind it there was apparently a lot of feeling. "Mr. Reston thought very highly of Steve, and I think was very disappointed but understanding when Steve made the career choice he did," Philip Shenon says. Beyond the personal attachment, some clerks say that those who signed on as clerks implicitly made a pact with Reston, and when one left the family, Reston was said to feel it as a personal failure.

It's hard to think of Reston—aging, ponderous, respectful of the establishment—as a role model for an aggressive reporter today. It might even be that Reston is the person Rattner had in mind when he told me he thinks jour-

GOOD CALL

OVERLY DERIVATIVE

Fourteen years before the complete meltdown of the financial industry last fall, Senator Byron Dorgan warned us about the risks posed by one of the key ingredients in that catastrophe: the complex financial packages known as derivatives. In "Very Risky Business" (October 1994), the North Dakota Democrat predicted with uncanny precision what actually happened in September 2008—the cascading failures of large lending institutions, the collapse of Fannie Mae, taxpayer-funded bailouts—and speculated that a derivatives-driven financial crisis would eventually leave Americans "nostalgic for the days of the $500 billion savings-and-loan collapse."

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nalists are motivated by their desire for glory and the chance to hobnob.

Both the *Times* and journalism in general invite such disregard. And former *Times* man J. Anthony Lukas points out that reporters don't have pure motives. "Especially after the civil rights movement, Vietnam, and Watergate, we were able to feather our financial and professional nests at the same time we were exposing inequities. The journalist is not an unmitigated crusader. He is an ambiguous figure."

This is much more apparent today than it was in the 1970s when Steve Rattner was inducted into the profession. As the glamour of journalism wears off—at least in the realm beyond the Beltway—we discover that not every reporter is out to make the world a better place to live in. But the answer isn't to conclude that what you do doesn't matter. For all his complacency, James Reston understands that. The other day, in one of his benign rambling columns, Reston expressed the hope that youth today doesn't just want security but is looking for "purpose and even service." I wonder if anybody was reading.

From "Hello Sweetheart, Get Me Mergers and Acquisitions," May 1986. Philip Weiss is now a Nation Institute fellow, and the editor of the news Web site Mondoweiss.

PAUL GLASTRIS ON THE DISABILITY RIGHTS MOVEMENT

In recent decades, some of Washington's most contentious policy battles have revolved around identity politics, the notion that members of marginalized groups can be true to themselves and advance their interests only by embracing and asserting that which makes them different—be it their race, gender, or sexual orientation. But as the disability rights movement gained force in the late 1980s, Paul Glastris offered a dissenting opinion. Recounting a traumatic electrical accident he experienced as a teenager, Glastris made the case that some identities are best denied.

My memory of the days that followed the accident consists of short, vivid scenes accompanied by whatever I was thinking at the time. There is the fireman with a pair of scissors, cutting my blue jeans from the ankles up, while assuring me that everything was going to be all right. ("I can't believe this guy's ruining my favorite pair of pants.") There is my mother standing in a hospital hallway as I'm wheeled past her on a gurney, her face showing suppressed emotion. (Trying for a bit of reassuring humor, I blurt out: "Well, Mom, looks like I messed myself up pretty good this time.")

Most of all I remember the towel the surgeon had draped across my eyes. I would drop in and out of consciousness, reemerging each time to find the damned towel blocking my view. I sensed the surgeon was a kind and understanding man, but his seemingly casual refusal to grant my repeated requests that he remove the towel struck me as patronizing. I was determined to assure him that I was brave enough to see whatever he obviously didn't want me to see. In and out I went, feeling no pain, no panic, just sleepy and curious. At some point I awoke with a keen suspicion of what the problem was.

"Doctor, is my arm gone?"

"Yes, Paul."

A long pause. "Can I see?"

Another long pause. Up went the towel. I lifted my head and looked around, as if emerging from a manhole. As I gazed at my right shoulder I remember thinking: "Hmm. How about that. Isn't that interesting." I had never seen human bone before, but there was a piece about half an inch wide, just below my shoulder, surrounded by a three-inch circle of angry-looking flesh. "Isn't that something," I thought as I lay my head back, feeling sleepy now. Before I dozed off, the towel came down over my eyes.

My fourteen-year-old mind was obviously engaged in some form of what psychiatrists call denial. Yet it wasn't the classic refusal to admit the painfully obvious. From the moment Dr. Monafo lifted the towel and let me look, and throughout the days and weeks ahead, I accepted the fact of my injuries. What did not occur to me, what I did not think about, what I "denied," were the ramifications. I had no dread about my future, no feeling of horror or revulsion or depression. It was not an act of conscious will on my part; my mind just naturally kept away from the fears and questions you'd expect I would have had.

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During my time at St. John's Mercy Hospital, I slept as much as I could from nine to five, out of fatigue, of course, but also because daytime TV was a bore. Sometimes I was awakened by one of the residents for a session of "debreeding." This involved laying me in a tub of saline while the resident trimmed off layers of dead tissue from my burns with surgical scissors. He worked on my arm and on the massive burn on my side. That burn ran from the bottom of my rib cage to the top of my thigh, and from my navel to my back. The resident would ask me questions about myself as he worked. I'd tell him about school, friends, sports, the woods. I asked him

BAD CALL

WILLIAM PERRY, BIG SPENDER

In a roundup of policymakers that the next Democratic president (optimistically assumed to be taking office in 1989) shouldn't hire, *Washington Monthly* editor—now editor in chief—Paul Glastris named William Perry, an undersecretary of defense under Jimmy Carter and a likely pick to head the Defense Department. Perry's enthusiasm for high-tech boondoggles and enlarging the Pentagon's secret, oversight-free "black budget," Glastris argued in "The Powers That Shouldn't Be" (October 1987), meant he would be trouble in the cabinet.

As it happened, the next Democratic administration did tap Perry, who served as Bill Clinton's second defense secretary. Perry turned out to not only be pretty good, but also a champion of reining in the defense budget, fighting a Republican Congress that wanted to give the Pentagon more money even as it was trying to slash budgets everywhere else.

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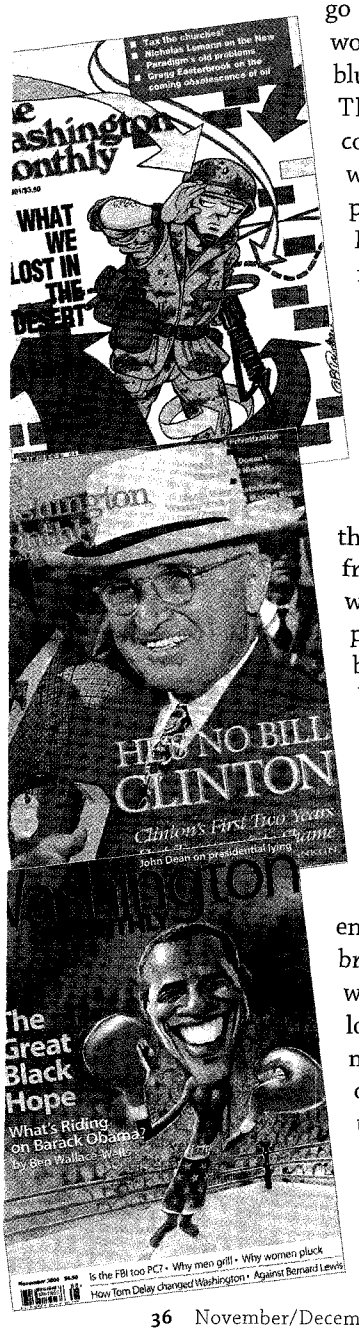
questions, too, eager to be part of the process. I learned that electrical burns kill cells slowly; you have to keep peeling away the dead flesh over many days before you know how extensive the burns really are. By the end of the debreeding, my hip bone was showing, and the ridges of intestines were plainly visible under a paper-thin layer of tissue on my side. After that, though, the process reversed itself. Wondrous scar tissue bubbled up to fill gaps and cover bones. Skin grafts—planed off my thighs—were then laid on top of the scar tissue.

At night, the burn unit would grow quiet and the fluorescent lights would go off, and my room would fill with the blue light of the TV. The nurses would come by asking if I was ready for my pain medicine, but I'd hold off until my favorite programs came on. Several of the nurses made me feel like I was their favorite patient, and so became my favorite nurses. I'd tell them about school, friends, sports, the woods; they'd complain about their boyfriends and husbands. A couple of these sweet women began to worry that I was holding back grief at my injuries and warned my parents that if I did not break down soon, it would be psychologically worse for me later. The breakdown never came, though I did collapse in tears once when one of my favorite nurses stubbornly refused to believe my claim that the doctors had wrapped my dressings so tight it was painful to breathe.



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My parents had been told that the best prosthetics work in town, and also the cheapest, was at the Shriners children's hospital. Late that summer, I was admitted for a two-week stay. I'm sure the well-meaning people at Shriners have brought hope and joy to thousands of young unfortunates, but I was not one of them. I'd sooner endure two weeks of debreeding baths than relive the experience of Shriners Hospital.

My negative reactions began the first time my parents and I sat in the waiting room. Murals on the wall illustrated characters from *Peter Pan*. Whoever had painted the mural was either thickheaded or perverse: dominating the scene was an image of Captain Hook. Things went downhill from there as I began my two-week stay at what is officially called Shriners Hospital for Crippled Children. The place made me feel like an extra in a Fellini film. Paraplegics, amputees, and sufferers of a whole range of horrible physical and mental birth defects were expected to live in affable harmony in the boys' ward. Somehow I was not overcome by fraternal joy. One young fellow whose fingers had sort of melted together as a result of a burn accident tried to befriend me by suggesting we compare injuries. I couldn't bring myself to reciprocate. When the ward staff organized a pitiful-looking kickball game outside, I stayed inside, in bed, staring at the ceiling and listening to rock music on the radio I'd brought in.

Horribly injured patients occupied the burn unit at St. John's, too, but the difference in atmosphere was telling. The burn unit was geared to saving your life and making you well—a mission with which I was understandably eager to cooperate. But it seemed that the whole point of Shriners was to get kids used to the idea of being handicapped—a process that I found myself resisting with all my might. A capable prosthetic engineer did build me a sturdy arm with a hook at the end. On first sight of it my face flushed, but I put it on without a grumble. I hated the hook, but I liked the way the arm filled out my shirt.

I was less cooperative in the occupational therapy lab. I spent hours there with a somewhat sluggish therapist and a two-year-old who, in addition to severe mental retardation, had been born with no arms, only fingers sprouting from his shoulders. The poor soul would sit among toys on a mat on the floor, strait-jacketed in twin prostheses, whimpering. The therapist would periodically and halfheartedly call out his name in a loud voice, vainly trying to get him to use his new appendages. Meanwhile she'd teach me various meager tasks I could do with my hook. I worked along, but without enthusiasm. She knew it, and subtly let me sense her disappointment.

My unpleasant experience at Shriners had one salutary effect: it revved up my desire to get back to normal life. I was not oblivious to the sometimes-insidious quality of adolescent social life and to the invisible barriers that I might find in my attempt to return to it. But I felt I had no choice; I suspected the alternative looked a lot like life inside Shriners Hospital. School was about to start, and I was fired up.

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That first day, sitting in class and roaming the halls with my friends, all of us upperclassmen, was glorious. The invisible barrier between some of my classmates and me was palpable, but so too was my celebrity status. Within weeks, I turned my celebrity status into a winning race for student council.

I was determined to enjoy myself, to take part in any activity that interested me. One was the "advanced" drama class. Theater is often a backwater activity in American schools, but at my junior high, the cool crowd vied for admission to this class because it was run by a dashing teacher named Tom Russert. Being admitted to the advanced drama class was a clear victory for my self-image: I dumped my prosthetic hook for a less practical but far more natural-

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looking mechanical hand. The decision annoyed the folks at Shriners, but that was of no concern to me. I felt only relief that the hook, and all the stares that came with it, were gone. I felt free to try out for a coveted part in one of Russert's all-school productions: a Jacques Brel musical review (pretty sophisticated stuff for St. Louis County). I won a lead role and had the time of my life working with others. We performed for three nights to packed houses. Unless you were sitting in the front rows, or were watching very carefully, or knew in advance, you would not have noticed my injuries. Of course, virtually everyone in the audience did know that I was the kid who was lying in a hospital bed the year before. That's the main reason—though I hope not the only one—why the applause I heard at the end of my solo number was the loudest of the night.

Special treatment like that didn't bother me. I accepted the small favors—extra time to finish the cumbersome task of writing exams and papers, for instance—in the level-the-playing-field spirit in which they were usually offered. The favors gave me what I wanted: the opportunity to participate in the normal life of the school and to feel like the normal kid I knew myself to be.

Which is why it was so insufferable when the inevitable accolades started to fly about my having "overcome" my "handicap." One day the principal called the whole school together for a speech on "true heroes," and the "hero" turned out to be me. I shrank in my chair. If someone chose to compliment me on my acting genius, or my political savvy, or my athletic agility, I was delighted to accept. I hungered for appreciation of my talents as much as anyone. But this was different. I was becoming everyone's example of the indomitable human spirit, and I hated it. The adults—it was always adults—who came up to me and expressed their sincere pride in the way I'd "overcome" my "handicap" didn't mean to embarrass me. They couldn't have known that I had not mentally incorporated those words into my identity, that my mind was busy building the self-image of a totally normal kid, and that those dreaded words were like floodlights turned on my injuries.

From "The Case for Denial," December 1988. Paul Glastris is now the editor in chief of the Washington Monthly.

KATHERINE BOO ON THE GULF WAR

On February 28, 1991, President George H. W. Bush declared the end of the rout of Saddam Hussein's army by an American-led coalition in the first Gulf War. It was the quickest and most painless major military victory in recent American history, and pundits speculated that the ghost of the Vietnam War had finally been exorcised. But Washington Monthly *editor Katherine Boo argued that the idea of a short war was a fantasy, and America's victory in Iraq could have unexpected repercussions in years to come.*

"By God," exclaimed President George H. W. Bush a week after the Gulf War ended, "we've kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all."

It wasn't hard to miss the subtext: this victory has restored our faith in weaponry as the wisest political tool. Yet as we retool and replenish for further world policing, it's worth remembering that most countries facing an alien army put up more resistance than the allegedly fearsome Iraqis were able to muster. Nowhere are predictions of clean war more misleading than in what historians call "asymmetrical wars": wars between Davids and Goliaths. To the weaker, conflict is not a cool calculus of risk, expense, and expectation, but a fight for national pride in which restraint and compromise are not options. A century after the fact, no military historian can adequately explain how, in the first battle of the Zulu-British war, 1,500 highly trained English riflemen were slain by native warriors bearing spears.

A few years later, American soldiers faced their Zulus in the Philippines, a place where, after the "splendid little war" in Cuba, few U.S. leaders expected to do any fighting at all. The object, explained Colonel Frederick Funston, was simply to "sit on and hold down the little brown brothers for a few months" until the Filipinos decided they didn't want independence after all.

Four months into the conflict, a stunned General Arthur MacArthur warned the White House that victory would be anything but easy. How in the world, he demanded, could one combat "the united and apparently spontaneous action of several millions of people"? (MacArthur's grim report caused President McKinley to marvel, "Why did all this 'truthtelling' become available only after the election?")

Virtually the same soundtrack played in Vietnam, where boys in pajamas somehow managed to kill 60,000 exquisitely armed American troops. We won in the Philippines; in Vietnam, we lost. In both places, we earned an animosity that still haunts us. Yet as bridges and buildings smoldered in the Baghdad suburbs, as limbless corpses poked up through the sand, Bush could claim with finality a day after the Gulf War cease-fire, "This war is now behind us."

In late January, a senior Iraqi official was asked by the BBC how it felt to be losing so badly. "We have already won," the official responded coolly, "because it wasn't a two-day war after all."

That assessment, of course, doesn't touch us. For if the history of war is written by the victor, so is the definition of winning. At about the same time, Charles Krauthammer could define the impending U.S. conquest in terms, not of the Middle East, but of ourselves—a

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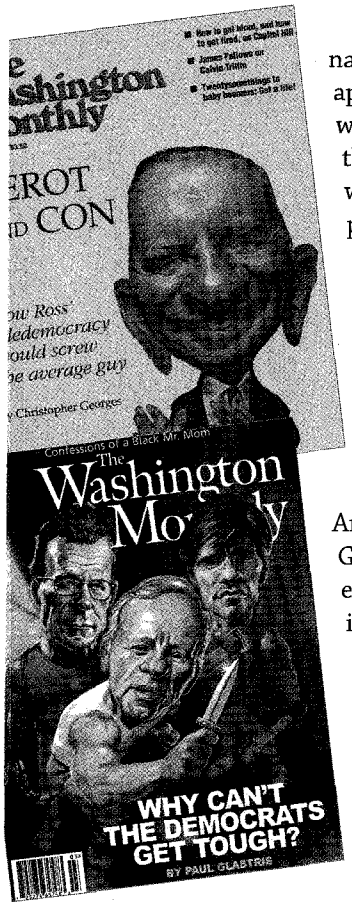

national psychotherapeutic cure: "If the war in the Gulf ends the way it began—with a dazzling display of American technological superiority, individual grit, and, most unexpectedly for Saddam, national resolve—we will no longer speak of post-Vietnam America. A new, post-Gulf America will emerge, its self-image, sense of history, even its political discourse transformed."

But as we revel in our psychic kill, it's worth considering the twelfth-century Normans who, self-image enhanced by their easy conquest of England, planned a brisk overrun of the farmers and peasants of Ireland. Almost 900 years later, Irish bombs explode in Victoria Station.

If history has anything to teach us about war, it's that we should be wary of the term "clean victory," skeptical of mantras about "kicking ass." Victory, as the Israelis learned in Lebanon, may be just another word for *bellum interruptum*. When we finally "won" it, the Gulf War had cost us perhaps $30 billion and ninety-one lives. For the Iraqis, the casualties may be more than a thousand times higher. Yet true victory—political stability, respect for human rights, democratic leadership, even stable oil prices—is no more assured in the Middle East, a region with more conventional weapons than all of NATO, than it was before we dropped ten times the tonnage of Hiroshima on the Gulf.

In late February, Palestinians gathered on the rooftops of the West Bank, cheering the Scud missiles as they arced toward Tel Aviv. A week later, Shiite fundamentalists stirred in Basra, armed by their Iranian brethren. Could it be that this new war, like the old ones, suggests another meaning for the Greeks' winged victory—something neither fleet nor transcendent? A promise, rather, that hovers just out of our grasp.

From "Wham, Bam, Thanks Saddam," April 1991. Katherine Boo is now a staff writer at the New Yorker.

MARJORIE WILLIAMS ON POLITICIANS' PRIVATE LIVES

Vanity Fair *and* Washington Post *writer Marjorie Williams garnered accolades in the final years of her life for her moving writings about her battle with liver cancer. But earlier in her career, Williams—who wrote frequently for the* Washington Monthly*—was best known for her penetrating profiles of Washington's political elites. Writing in the* Monthly *in 1991, Williams made the case that digging into public figures' private lives was not just a legitimate journalistic project, but a necessary one.*

Pity the politician, beset by vultures, fanatical reformers, and a moralistic press. For at least a decade, it's been open season on anyone foolish enough to run for office or serve in government—an age of "mindless cannibalism," in the words of former speaker of the House and onetime entree Jim Wright.

Or so says the chorus of analysts who have lately specialized in second thoughts about the cloud of scandal that enshrouded the Reagan administration and then drifted down Pennsylvania Avenue to engulf the House leadership and the Keating Five. They argue that the ethical, financial, political, and sexual scandals of recent years represent a kind of hysteria, and that Americans in general and journalists in particular need to reevaluate how far they are willing to go in judging the human creatures elected to govern us.

Standards really have changed in Washington, in a lot of different areas. Lest mine seem a knee-jerk reaction by one of the press corps jackals, I must grant some of the specifics. It *is* horrible to have a mob of journalists camped out in your begonias. Yes, journalists too often rely on group instinct to set their narrative direction during a scandal-in-progress. And critics quite rightly criticize the press when it prints or broadcasts unfounded rumors on the grounds that the existence of the rumor is itself news because everybody—that is, in the community of a thousand or so people who make up insider politics—is talking about it.

But my observation, in five years of Washington journalism, has been that the major media more often betray news consumers through excessive coziness, power lust, and the simple eagerness to be liked than through the will to drive their hatchets into the powerful men and women they cover. In Washington reporting it isn't true that all the laurels go to the writer who kills the king; success comes more easily to the one who befriends him.

• • •

Critics of the "new moralism" fear the press corps as a pack of teetotaling, prudish character cops. But the best argument for an expansive approach to reporting on politicians' backgrounds, habits, histories, and families has very little to do with vice. At the end of Freud's century we understand that people are infinitely complex beings who integrate a huge number of motives and passions in everything they do. Man is not easily compartmentalized, as Washington has long liked to believe; weaknesses and strengths may all be relevant.

This complexity is what journalists are edging toward when they mutter their arguments about how something or other speaks to a candidate's "judgment." We have only begun to invent a journalism that can write honestly and responsibly about the subtleties of human nature in politics, but I do believe that is what we are trying to do, and that it is a laudable goal.

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Finally, there are cases that do not pose themselves as familiar questions of public interest, but of which the public should unquestionably be told. An excellent recent case was the *Washington Post's* publication, in the spring of 1989, of a story detailing the ordeal of a woman named Pamela Small. Sixteen years earlier she had been senselessly attacked in a store by a clerk who lured her to a back room, pounded her skull in with a hammer, and left her to die.

She survived, but her attacker served only twenty-seven months in a county jail. One reason for his lenient treatment was his relation, by marriage, to Rep. Jim Wright, who interceded on his behalf and promised him a job. Over the years, John Mack had worked his way up to become a top aide to Wright and perhaps the most powerful staffer in the House.

When Small finally decided to tell her story, the reaction in political Washington was astonishing: *Oh*, said many people on the Hill. *We knew that*. It turned out that most of the reporters covering the Hill had known about Mack's crime but had concluded that he'd paid his debt to society. The crime had taken place long ago; and, after all, he was a source. So they hadn't thought to mention it—not even, in many cases, to their editors.

The *Post* was widely criticized for running the story in the midst of Wright's ethics troubles. But it was a riveting story, and it said some mighty riveting things about the culture of Capitol Hill that a man had so easily sloughed off the burden of an unfathomably vicious crime. Surely ordinary men and women, the people out there paying Mack one of the highest salaries in government, had a right to consider whether there are or should be limits to the concepts of rehabilitation and atonement. (When the story ran, they did, and apparently there were. Mack resigned under pressure a week later.)

* * *

Journalists will go on debating what should and should not be grist for their mill. Standards will continue to vary enough so that there will be no clear "statute of limitations," no bright line dividing the areas of life a politician will and won't be seeing on the evening news. The lack of consensus will be confusing and sometimes messy. But recent events suggest that the public is capable of a carefully modulated response to "scandalous" news about public figures. Think, for example, of the different reactions to the dope-smoking pasts of two Supreme Court nominees. Douglas Ginsburg was judged harshly because he had smoked marijuana in the presence of students while a professor at Harvard Law School. Clarence Thomas is judged more leniently because his drug use, as reported by the press, was less a matter of habit and further in the past.

But scandal reporting does tend to distort politics. If the latest and most low down gets the biggest play, it's impossible for any news organization to provide context for the work of reporters who are out there digging around in General Accounting Office and inspector general reports or analyzing program costs for a new weapons system. If our headlines are constant banners of sleaze, how can the public be expected to grasp the magnitude of a decade-long blunder costing hundreds of billions of dollars? The boy has cried wolf too often.

But critics err in seeing scandal coverage as the source of every weakness in contemporary journalism, and positing some past golden age of journalism in which gross misprision and policy blundering were easily and often exposed by reporters. Which reporters were systematically exposing the political cynicism that lay behind the Truman administration's loyalty program? Where was the outcry in the fifties, when U.S. soldiers were exposed to atomic tests in the Nevada desert? The same mourned-for respectability and forbearance that turned a blind eye to successive presidents' philandering also, all too often, deferentially overlooked affairs in which the public had an even more obvious stake.

From "Is It Any of Your Business?" September 1991. Marjorie Williams died in 2005. Her essays and profiles have been posthumously collected in The Woman at the Washington Zoo: Writings on Politics, Family, and Fate *and* Reputation: Portraits in Power.

AMY WALDMAN ON HOME SHOPPING

In 1995 the Internet had yet to revolutionize the way people bought and sold merchandise, Amazon.com was a quixotic-seeming startup, and the concept of home shopping belonged to a handful of lo-fi TV channels like QVC and the Home Shopping Network. Writing in the Washington Monthly *that year, editor Amy Waldman took the channels to task for preying on elderly viewers, who were increasingly lonely and adrift in the late twentieth century.*

After a man died several months ago at the Virginian Retirement Community in Fairfax, his family went to collect his worldly goods. They found more than they bargained for: his home was crammed, floor to ceiling, with possessions they never knew he had. There were kitchen gadgets, cos-

GOOD CALL

WANING INTELLIGENCE

Two months before the 9/11 attacks, University of Georgia political science professor Loch Johnson warned that America's intelligence agencies were poorly prepared to anticipate the threats the United States faced in the post–Cold War world. Johnson argued in "The CIA's Weakest Link" (July/August 2001) that the CIA had lost far too many of its intelligence analysts, the quasi-academic experts who made sense of the information the agency gathered, and that the few who remained had too little familiarity with the world outside of Russia and Europe. Thanks to analysis oversights, the CIA had failed to anticipate India's nuclear tests in 1998, the outbreak of violence in Macedonia in 2001, and—most ominously—the bombing of the *U.S.S. Cole* in the Yemeni port of Aden by Islamic terrorists in 2000. The biggest failure, of course, was right around the corner.

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tume jewelry, bed linens, and cleansers, all by the dozens.

He had bought it all from the world's most accessible stores: the home shopping networks that came through his television into his living room twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. This man, whose name the retirement home withheld for privacy, ordered a package from QVC or Home Shopping Network (HSN), the two leading home shopping channels, almost every day. Some of what came he gave away. Most of it simply piled up, unused.

What had brought him to line his walls with the fruits of home shopping? In a word, companionship. Home shopping hosts didn't just sell to him—they spoke to him. An employee at the Virginian recalls that the man spent a lot of time by himself. He did not make friends easily and he spoke of being lonely. But when he bought, he said he could keep operators chatting to him for half an hour. He had found a way to fill his days and sleepless nights.

He was not alone in his discovery. As the hours cycle past on home shopping channels, the disembodied voices of buyers, calling in to offer "testimonials" on their purchases, float above the sparkling descriptions of cubic zirconium jewelry. Most are female—Dorothy from Daytona, Betty from Fresno, Helen from Mexico City, Indiana. Many of the voices are beginning to crack with age. And their extraordinary enthusiasm for the products—and the hosts, and the show itself—masks something else: a deep, abiding need for human contact. "I live alone," says a woman named Erma who calls in on a Monday morning. "All I've got to do is watch QVC."

* * *

In their possession of an audience's hopes and fears, home shopping hosts are like no one so much as the fictional advice columnist in Nathaniel West's 1933 novella *Miss Lonelyhearts*. A young reporter takes the job as a joke, but then realizes that the letters to him are genuine expressions of suffering. Even worse, their writers take him seriously. "Dear Miss Lonelyhearts ..." begin the letters from "Desperate," "Disillusioned-with-tubercular-husband," "Sick-of-it-All." The pain in his correspondents' lives, and his own powerlessness to help them, eats away at Miss Lonelyhearts. Finally, unable to bear the pathos of human existence, he is driven to self-destruction.

Today, the lonely and desperate turn to home shopping hosts who seem to have no such interest in acknowledging the limits of their powers. They appear perfectly comfortable marketing miracles. One host reads a written testimonial from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. The letter begins like any to Miss Lonelyhearts could: "I was really at a low point. I needed something." But then comes a distinctly un-Westian salvation: "Then someone turned me onto Destiny Perfume. It smells so good that it has really given me strength to go on for me and my family."

When real pain and loneliness do seep through, the home shopping solution is to studiously ignore it. Alan and Wendi are plugging a diamond ring. Edna from Ohio calls in. "If you think your life is going pretty good right now, wait until you buy this ring," says Alan.

"Well actually," Edna responds. "It's going pretty bad." Her words vanish, unacknowledged, beneath the chatter of the hosts.

Sally from Chicago has bought some perfume, and she calls in to talk about it: "I'm lying in bed, this is my day off, I'm being a princess." Her voice is raspy with age and cigarettes. She works in a store, and says men tell her how good she smells. "That's wonderful," the host says, and then asks, suggestively, "Did you put some on before you went to bed last night?"

"No," says Sally. "I'm a widow."

When women describe their bouts with cancer or their hospital stays, as many do, the testimonials become farcical struggles between hosts trying to truncate the calls or push them toward the product-driven point, and callers hanging on for dear life, trying to prolong the conversation.

The question is why anyone would turn for comfort to talking heads out to make a sale. The answer lies partly in the same post–World War II social transformation that gave more Americans spending power. With increased income, Americans moved into dispersed suburbs. As women moved into the workforce, neighborhood networks and social clubs shrunk, isolating the women left behind. Driven to spend more, men and women worked more. Families broke more easily, and even those that held together felt the pressures of work and mobility. And television pulled us off streets and front porches and into living rooms.

In its evocation of Tupperware parties, the kaffeeklatsch, Mary Kay cosmetics saleswomen stopping by your home—all traditions that have fallen, or are falling, by the wayside—home shopping hearkens back to the past in another way: it speaks to women as they were before women's liberation. Callers are "honey" and "dear." "That executive look" is just another fashion statement. Women lunch, they shop, they entertain, they go on cruises, they have craft parties. Femininity sells. Dolls, cooed over by hosts as if they were children, are very popular.

BAD CALL

THE REALITY-BASED COMMUNITY

In the first summer of George W. Bush's presidency, *Washington Monthly* editor Nicholas Thompson profiled Mitch Daniels, Bush's Office of Management and Budget director, who had just overseen the passage of a $1.3 trillion tax cut. In "Dick Cheney's Dick Cheney" (July/August 2001), Thompson argued that Daniels, a fiscal conservative whose budget-slashing credentials had earned him the nickname "The Blade," exemplified why liberals should be worried about the new administration: Bush's team was not only deeply conservative, but frighteningly competent at their jobs. After the pre-9/11 intelligence failures, two botched wars, Hurricane Katrina, a $400 billion deficit, and a manhandled economy, we wish Thompson had been right.

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If the success of home shopping portends the future, marketing will turn to ever more sophisticated attempts to play on our nostalgia for what we've lost, to peddle connections to other people via commerce. Home shopping foreshadows what's so insidious about that prospect: even as QVC and HSN try to mimic the feeling of community, they draw us, as television always has, even further away from the real thing.

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At six a.m., a woman named Doris phones HSN to purchase a portable copier for $229. "How are you?" the host asks. "Fair," Doris replies, her voice shaking slightly. She explains that she orders things from home shopping and mail-order catalogues, forgets what she orders, and then orders them again. She wants the copier to keep track of her purchases.

"Good idea," the host says, smothering her pathos with his enthusiasm. "And running down to the corner copier is *so* inconvenient."

Doris will have her copier. And she will be yoked even more tightly to an isolation that only her television—and another purchase—can penetrate.

From "Lonely Hearts, Classy Dreams, Empty Wallets," June 1995. Amy Waldman is now a contributing editor at the Atlantic, *and is at work on her first novel.*

TA-NEHISI COATES ON BILL CLINTON

After leaving the Oval Office in 2001, Bill Clinton launched a foundation to tackle global woes like AIDS and climate change, and opened an office in Harlem to much fanfare. Ta-Nehisi Coates took the occasion to plumb the black community's love affair with the nation's forty-second president.

Bill Clinton's scandals were supposed to end on January 20. But days after leaving office, he was taking hits for his late-night pardon of financier fugitive Marc Rich, and for absconding with White House furniture. Congress was threatening to pull the plug on his plans for a pricey New York office suite, and Wall Street firms were canceling his speaking engagements. Other people might have buckled under the pressure and checked themselves into the Bali Hilton just to get away from it all.

But what did Clinton do? He went to Harlem, the capital of black America and, as such, the best place for the scandal-fatigued to find redemption. Harlem didn't disappoint; it gave Clinton a welcome befitting a war hero. As he strolled the neighborhood, people screamed, "We love you," and "Touch my hand." Clinton lunched on Creole cuisine at the Bayou, where a busboy told the *Baltimore Sun*, "I never wanted Clinton to leave office."

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There is a long and storied history of men of dubious repute finding acquittal in the black community. Often this is because of a deep résumé of political activism. Adam Clayton Powell's womanizing never threatened his mastery of Harlem. The FBI managed to record the most intimate details of Martin Luther King Jr.'s philandering, yet to this day many black Americans dismiss King's extramarital lapses as a hoax conspired by his enemies. When Marion Barry was caught on tape smoking crack, many African American men in Washington began sporting T-shirts exclaiming, "The bitch set him up." The story of the Rev. Jesse Jackson, with his love child and illicit payments to his mistress, is the most recent installment in these chronicles.

Even men of negligible political significance have found the black community a welcome haven. O. J. Simpson spent his entire professional life ducking black people and trying to ingratiate himself with whites. But when he was acquitted of murdering his ex-wife, you would have thought black America had won the lottery. After Mike Tyson was accused of rape, he received the backing of the National Baptist Convention USA, the largest black organization in the world. It mattered little that the woman Tyson was later convicted of raping was a black Baptist Sunday school teacher.

Tyson and Simpson showed that neither psychological instability nor outright rejection of black America could curb its loyalties to its prodigal sons. But Clinton trumps all comers. He is the first white person to gain entry into black America's house of repentant sinners.

Clinton won his ghetto pass by cultivating an image as the best friend black America has ever had in the White House. While I am in a small minority, especially in black America, I have never bought into this image of Clinton. I was deeply disappointed with his record in the criminal justice arena, where blacks have been disproportionately affected by the prison boom that occurred on his watch and left one out of every three black men without the right to vote. Most of Clinton's attempts at racial conciliation seemed to me little more than television crusades—a perception only compounded by his January *New York Times* column urging Bush to implement all the things he failed to do, such as equalizing the penalties for crack and powder cocaine possession.

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Little of this, though, affected black public opinion, which was shaped by more potent symbols. Clinton installed a record number of African Americans in his cabinet and spoke

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about race with a frankness that black America was not used to hearing from a white person, much less the head of the free world. Clinton's tour of Africa and subsequent apology for the epoch of European colonization and enslavement may have been halfhearted, but they were much more than black people had ever seen from a white person in power.

Clinton's economic policies were also a boon for African Americans, whose median income reached an all-time high during his administration, even as poverty among blacks plummeted thanks in large part to his increases in the minimum wage and the Earned Income Tax Credit.

But Clinton's true appeal lay in his ability to raise the blood temperature of white conservatives. Every time Bob Novak harrumphed on CNN, or Dan Burton dismissed Clinton as a scumbag, black America invoked the "enemy of my enemy" formula and deduced that Clinton must be doing something right.

Moreover, Clinton was the first president who seemed truly comfortable around African Americans. George Mason University professor Roger Wilkins says, "I have never seen another president—as a matter of fact, I have seen very few white people who are as at ease with black people as him. He genuinely likes black people, and blacks can sense that. And there is a part of him that seems genuinely interested in achieving equality in America."

Less appreciated, however, is the way Clinton meshes with some of the unseemly aspects of black identity. In 1998, when Toni Morrison asserted that Clinton was "our first black president," she was roundly—and rightly—blasted for invoking an assortment of stereotypes to bolster her argument. Yet there is a place in African American iconography for men like Bill Clinton.

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In many ways, African American culture celebrates scoundrels. The glorification of drug dealers is not the result of hip-hop as much as its heritage. Before gangsta rap, there were blaxploitation flicks making heroic legends out of criminals. Before that, there were the toasts, African American oral poetry that celebrated the hustler. The way Clinton manages to outslick his adversaries, smooth-talk his constituents, and womanize while he's at it puts him squarely in a celebrated African American tradition of tricksters and players.

Clinton's qualification for the African American rogues gallery has earned him a few choice honorifics rarely bestowed on white people. In private conversations among blacks, Clinton is ghetto, a nigga (not nigger, mind you)—terms that say: He is one of us. The way Clinton straight-housed official White House furniture only adds credence to the description. In the eyes of black America, Clinton is Pimping Sam gone white trash, or Shine holding court in the White House. After all, not even Marion Barry could top getting a blow job in the Oval Office.

From "Soul Mates," April 2001. Ta-Nehisi Coates is now a contributing editor and blogger at the Atlantic.

GOOD CALL

THE WELL-WIRED WAR ROOM

After the dot-com bubble burst, many pundits and politicos believed that the prospect of the Internet revolutionizing politics had burst with it. "The Internet is Tinkertoys," declared Jim Jordan, the head of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee.

But the *Washington Monthly*'s Nicholas Thompson argued that "[f]or savvy candidates, the Internet has become the new political machine." All the attention paid to the Web's bells and whistles, Thompson wrote in "Machined Politics" (May 2002), had obscured the potential for the less-sexy opportunities it offered—its efficiencies of organization and communication—to become a potent political tool in the right hands. The use of the online tactics he identified would prove to be one of the decisive factors in Obama's 2008 victory.

JOSHUA MICAH MARSHALL ON RADICAL ISLAM

Shortly after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Washington Monthly *contributing writer Joshua Micah Marshall warned that liberal intellectuals, like their conservative counterparts, were overestimating their ideological enemies in the Middle East.*

May you live, as the Chinese curse has it, in interesting times. For the last eighteen months, we've all been living in "interesting times"—often frightfully so. Yet for intellectuals there is always a craving that times would be ... well, just a little more interesting.

That's been especially true for the last half century because a shadow has hung over political intellectuals in the English-speaking world, and in some respects throughout the West. It is the shadow of the ideological wars (and the blood-and-iron wars) that grew out of World War I—from communism, to fascism, appeasement, vital-center liberalism, and the rest of it. Even as these struggles congeal into history, their magnitude and seriousness hardly diminish. Understanding fascism, understanding that it could be neither accommodated nor appeased, understanding that Soviet communism was rather like fascism—these were much more than examples of getting things right or of demonstrating intellectual courage and moral seriousness. These insights, decisions, and moments of action came to *define* those qualities.

Since then, things have never been quite the same. Like doctors who want to treat the most challenging patients or cops who want to take down the worst criminals, it's only natural for people who think seriously about political and moral issues to seek out the most challenging and morally vexing questions to ponder and confront. Yet, since the Cold War hit its middle period in the late 1950s, nothing has really quite compared.

September 11 changed all that. Al-Qaeda's war on America and America's

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war on terrorism provided just such a vast field for thought and action. In the months after the attacks, writers began identifying the radical Islamist menace with fascism—Islamo-fascism, as the catch phrase had it. The idea that the war on terror should be seen as the latter-day equivalent or extension of the battles against last century's totalitarianisms has been bandied about in opinion columns and magazine articles for more than a year with varying degrees of seriousness.

But are these analogies really apt? When comparing "Muslim totalitarianism" to fascism, communism, or other totalitarian utopianisms, the most striking thing about radical Islamism, and the Muslim world generally, is not its strength but its weakness. The dissonance between the Islamic world's historic self-conception and present-day reality is what produces so much of the rage in the Middle East, which grows cancerous when filtered into various extremist ideologies. Unlike fascism or communism, militant Islam isn't a rising power, but a threat precisely because of its dysfunction and weakness.

Of course, the fact that fanatical Islamist terrorists could get their hands on weapons of mass destruction is a serious caveat. But it does place the issue in a certain context. It is a grave threat, but in a very specific, physical way—a threat to liberal societies but hardly the kind of ideological or political threat that great totalitarianisms posed a half a century ago. Islamist fanatics might destroy a whole city in the West, a catastrophic event. But they'll never conquer or subvert a country. And this is the heart of the difference. To paraphrase Arthur Schlesinger, Islamism is a danger to the West but hardly a danger in the West—or China, or Latin America, or anywhere else where Islam is not already the dominant religion.

For intellectuals, however, there is always a temptation to take momentous, morally serious questions and make them out to be slightly more momentous and world-historical than they really are. Call it the Orwellian temptation. George Orwell not only epitomized what an intellectual can and should be. He has also become the symbol of the role the best intellectuals played in those critical mid-century years. Along the way, however, the image he cast—or rather his ghost, or his shade—has also become part of the pornography of intellectuals.

Recalling those vivid images of the Twin Towers' collapse, it is uncomfortable to have to argue that someone is *overstating* the danger of radical Islam. Nevertheless, to confront the very real threat we face, nothing is more important than seeing that danger for what it is—not through the distorting prism of our grandparents' world. We have now toppled one of the worst regimes in the region. We have a foothold in the heartland of Islam. We have to decide how to proceed. Do we declare all-out war with much of the Muslim world or craft an approach more narrowly tailored to secure our safety and advance their freedom? Grandiose visions beget grandiose actions, which often end tragically. And grandiosity is a sin of intellectuals, too.

From "The Orwell Temptation," May 2003. Joshua Micah Marshall is the founder and publisher of Talking Points Memo.

BRUCE REED ON WASHINGTON'S WARRING SUBCULTURES

In early 2004, the real-estate-fueled economy was chugging along, Iraq had yet to collapse into sectarian war, FEMA's post-Katrina failures were still a glimmer in Michael Brown's eye, and most liberals thought the biggest problem with the Bush administration was its politics—not its ability to get the job done. But veteran Democratic policy adviser Bruce Reed saw the real problem: Bush's inner circle had too many political hacks and not enough policy wonks. Putting on his cultural anthropologist hat, Reed dissected official Washington's two dominant subcultures and why they scorn, but ultimately need, each other.

Strip away the job titles and party labels, and you will find two kinds of people in Washington: political hacks and policy wonks. Hacks come to Washington because anywhere else they'd be bored to death. Wonks come here because nowhere else could we bore so many to death. These divisions extend far beyond the hack havens of political campaigns and consulting firms and the wonk ghettos of think tanks on Dupont Circle. Some journalists are wonks, but most are hacks. Some columnists are hacks, but most are wonks. All members of Congress pass themselves off as wonks, but many got elected as hacks. Lobbyists are hacks who make money pretending to be wonks. The *Washington Monthly*, the *New Republic*, and the entire political blogosphere consist largely of wonks pretending to be hacks. The *Hotline* is for hacks; *National Journal* is for wonks. *The West Wing* is for wonks; *K Street* was for hacks.

After two decades in Washington as a wonk working among hacks, I have come to the conclusion that the gap between Republicans and Democrats is as nothing compared to the one between these two tribes. We wonks think we're smarter than hacks. Hacks think that if being smart makes someone a wonk, they'd rather be stupid. Wonks think all

GOOD CALL

THE FINE PRINT ON THE MORTGAGE

At a time when most economists were pooh-poohing the dangers of a housing bubble, and Alan Greenspan was inflating it with low interest rates and advising homeowners to take out adjustable-rate mortgages, *Washington Monthly* editor Benjamin Wallace-Wells made a crucial observation. The recovery from the post-9/11 economic slump, he wrote, was perched on top of the housing bubble—for the first time in American history, appreciating property values were the main engine driving consumer spending. "Within the next year or two," Wallace-Wells predicted in "There Goes the Neighborhood" (April 2004), "that bubble is likely to burst, and when it does, it may very well take the American economy down with it." He was off by a year, but hey, nobody's perfect.

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hacks are creatures from another planet, like James Carville. Hacks share Paul Begala's view that wonks are all "propeller heads," like Elroy on *The Jetsons*. Wonks think the differences between hacks and wonks are as irreconcilable as those between the Hutus and the Tutsis. Hacks think it's just like wonks to bring up the Hutus and the Tutsis.

In every administration, wonks and hacks fight it out. The measure of a great president is his ability to make sense of them both. A president must know the real problems on Americans' minds. For that he needs hacks. But ultimately, he needs policies that will actually solve those problems. For that he needs wonks.

President Bush has husbanded some big policy changes through Congress—a testament to his considerable political skills. Unfortunately, his policies seem to be better at causing problems than solving them. The economy can't create jobs despite hundreds of billions of dollars in stimulus. The reconstruction in Iraq is going over like a remake of *Ishtar*. The price tag of the new Medicare law is soaring even faster than prescription drug costs. With a record $521 billion deficit, Bush has just presented what might be called the Justin Timberlake budget, ripping off the taxpayers and pretending it wasn't on purpose.

Democrats are understandably eager to blame all these epic failures on ideology. To be sure, Bush is running perhaps the most partisan and ideological White House in the modern era. But the longer I watch this White House, the more convinced I become that ideology is just a convenient rationalization for why the president's agenda isn't working. The real reason is darker and more disturbing: the Bush White House is so obsessed with the politics of its agenda that it never even asks whether it will work.

Journalist Ron Suskind first sounded this warning in January 2003, in an extraordinary *Esquire* interview with John DiIulio, the brilliant academic who had resigned from Bush's faith-based initiative the previous year. DiIulio told Suskind, "There is no precedent in any modern White House for what is going on in this one: a complete lack of a policy apparatus. What you've got is everything—and I mean everything—being run by the political arm." As if to prove the point, the White House got DiIulio to disavow the allegations as soon as they became public.

Suskind's new book about former Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill, *The Price of Loyalty*, is one long lament on the same theme: the administration's complete disregard for evidence. Every White House worries too much about politics. What DiIulio and O'Neill most tellingly reveal is how little this White House worries about anything else.

* * *

The great irony is that the political equilibrium of the nation's capital depends on both wonks and hacks, but the two groups can't even communicate because the hack and wonk dialects have so few words in common. I learned this first as a campaign speechwriter and later as a White House policy geek, when I was sometimes called in to translate. In 1993, I went to a meeting with some of the president's top communications strategists to plan the signing ceremony for a bill that had just passed the Congress. A wonk had to point out that under the Constitution, if the president fails to sign a bill within ten days while the Congress is adjourned, the bill is pocket vetoed and does not become law.

On the other hand, Paul O'Neill is naive to wish for an upstairs-downstairs divide, where wonks make all the decisions and hacks get to spin them. As a wonk, I would be the last to suggest that my fellow propeller heads have all the answers. I spent Clinton's first term across the hall from Ira Magaziner, architect of the administration's health care plan. The road to Ira's office was paved with good intentions.

* * *

The secret of Bill Clinton's success was that he was the biggest wonk ever to hold the presidency, with political gifts that no hack could equal. He said he would cut the deficit and boost the economy, and he did. He said he would put more cops on the street to lower the crime rate, and he did. He said he would end welfare as we know it in a way that wouldn't hurt those in the system, and he did. Clinton was his own best policy adviser, by far, yet he also would have been the greatest political consultant in the history of the world's second oldest profession.

GOOD CALL

THE DEMOCRATS' REAL WELFARE PROBLEM

Many factors contributed to John Kerry's defeat in the 2004 election, but as George W. Bush celebrated his second inauguration, *Washington Monthly* editor Amy Sullivan zeroed in on the one that Democrats didn't want to talk about: the party's campaign consultants were losers. Super-consultants like Bob Shrum and Mark Mellman, Sullivan argued in "Fire the Consultants" (January/February 2005), had track records that would have gotten them laughed out of any Republican war room. But because they were deeply burrowed into the Democratic campaign apparatus that picked candidates, Democratic hopefuls were bullied into paying them huge sums of money to dispense the same half-baked advice that had doomed earlier campaigns.

Sullivan wrote that Republicans did better in part because they gave upstarts like Karl Rove a chance, and she suggested similar outsiders that the Democrats should tap for national races. Among them, she pointed out, was a relatively unknown Chicago-based strategist named David Axelrod, who had just helped a Democratic state legislator in Illinois win his first term in the U.S. Senate. Four years later, Barack Obama's campaign, helmed by none other than Axelrod, cruised to victory. Meanwhile, Hillary Clinton's—which was run by the veteran consultants that Sullivan had deemed failures—faltered in the Democratic primaries after a series of tactical blunders.

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Presidents don't have to be superwonks, and George W. Bush certainly never promised to be one. But in the end, Bush's undoing may be that he has planted his flag so firmly on one side of the wonk-hack divide. Sooner or later, the fate of every White House comes down to the way the president thinks.

From "Bush's War Against Wonks," March 2004. Bruce Reed is the CEO of the Democratic Leadership Council.

NICHOLAS CONFESSORE ON DAVID BROOKS

If you ask liberals who their favorite conservative pundit is, odds are they will name New York Times *columnist David Brooks—a writer with a reputation for perceptive social observation and less of an appetite for partisan red meat than the Bill Kristols and Charles Krauthammers of the world. But in a 2004 book review,* Washington Monthly *editor Nicholas Confessore—who, incidentally, now shares a platform with Brooks as a* New York Times *reporter—argued that Brooks's career as a public intellectual was a Jekyll and Hyde act, with Brooks the Journalist too often eclipsed by Brooks the Hack.*

I suspect I'm not the only one who has noticed that the quality of David Brooks's *Times* column varies wildly from week to week. One day, he's funny, unpredictable, insightful; you read along, glad that the *Times* has given this man a permanent place in its pages. Three days later, he's bloviating like Michael Savage, and Maureen Dowd doesn't seem so silly anymore. But if you peruse Brooks's considerable pre-*Times*ian oeuvre, you'll find that the same inconsistency is evident throughout his work. There is Brooks the Journalist. And there is Brooks the Hack.

Brooks the Journalist got his start working the police beat in Chicago; today, nearly alone among those conservative pundits who habitually bash the press for its laziness and myopia, Brooks still actually ventures out into the real world to do his own reporting on what it holds. Often when reading his best work, you feel that he's perfectly explained or captured something you knew to be true but couldn't find precisely the right words for. He is a keen observer, adept at distilling his reporting into generalizations that illuminate American life. The most famous of these is, of course, the bohemian bourgeoisie, or Bobos, the upscale, older liberals who "combined the countercultural sixties and the achieving eighties into one social ethos," as Brooks put it in his best-selling book, *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There. Bobos* was a best-seller not only because it captured the mores of middle-aged, blue-state boomers—people who wear expedition-quality anoraks to shovel snow and spend thousands of dollars on brand-new dinner tables designed to look worn and authentic—but also because he was sympathetic to his subjects. (A wise move, as they were also his audience.) "I'm a member of this class," Brooks assured readers. "We're not so bad."

Indeed, such people enjoy reading Brooks the Journalist precisely because he is one of the few right-leaning pundits who doesn't seem to believe that liberals are evil. Though conservative, Brooks the Journalist is reflective rather than bombastic; his zingers barely singe, let alone burn. To put things in Brooksian terms, he's a conservative, but the kind you'd bring home to discuss politics over $17-a-pound artisanal goat cheese and organic chardonnay bottled by third-generation French peasants. It's no wonder the *Times* felt comfortable putting him on the op-ed page.

But there is also Brooks the Hack. While Brooks the Journalist is honest and self-critical, Brooks the Hack is willing to carry water for his political allies. He opines that the Bush administration is "drunk on truth serum" and "exceptionally forthright" about its policies. He unsheathes the marvelous sophistry that "our government couldn't even come up with a plan for postwar Iraq—thank goodness, too, because any 'plan' hatched by technocrats in Washington would have been unfit for Iraqi reality." (Actually, technocrats at the Departments of Defense and State did hatch a pretty good plan. Alas, Brooks's fellow travelers among the Pentagon's civilian appointees ignored it.) He insists that pro-war neoconservatives "travel in widely different circles and don't actually have much contact with one another," when in fact a game of "Two Degrees of Richard Perle" would get you just about every member of this alleged neocon diaspora.

Similarly, Brooks the Hack indulges in predictable—and frequently dishonest—caricatures of Democrats. He once wrote that "upscale areas everywhere" voted for Al Gore, even though a cursory check of census data reveals that seven of the ten richest counties in America voted for George W. Bush in 2000. When it began to look like John Kerry would carry the Democratic banner in 2004, Brooks argued that the Democrats "won't nominate a guy unless his family had an upper-deck berth on the Mayflower"—this of a party whose last five nominees included a Georgia peanut farmer, a guy raised by a working-class single mom in Arkansas, and another born to Greek immigrants. Yet Brooks the Hack seems to revel in cheap shots, such as implying that the term "neocon" was anti-Semitic—"con is short for 'conservative' and neo is short for 'Jewish,'" he recently wrote in the *Times*.

FUZZY MATH

While other pollsters were predicting a photo finish in the 2004 presidential election, *Hotline* editor in chief Chuck Todd went out on a limb in the *Washington Monthly*, predicting in "A Kerry Landslide?" (May 2004) that "it's going to be Kerry in a rout." Unfortunately, the limb broke.

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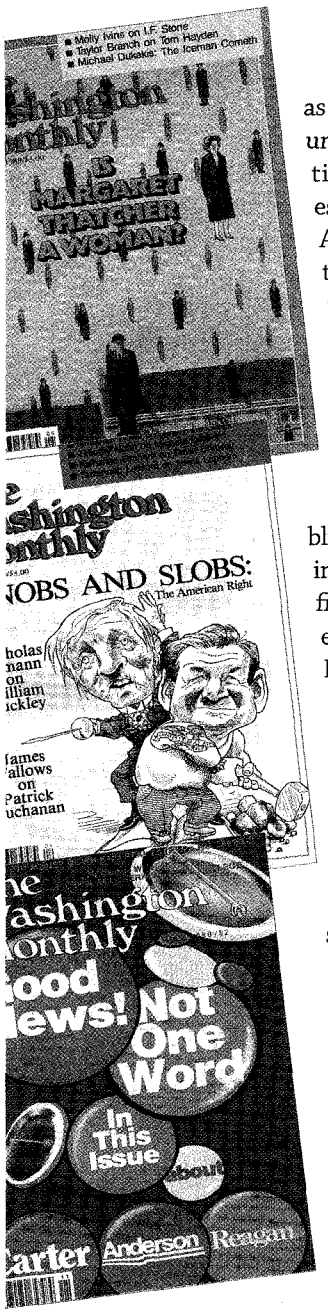

More broadly, whereas Brooks the Journalist unfurls grand abstractions that illuminate essential truths about American life, Brooks the Hack peddles unreliable generalizations that describe the world as he and his friends wish it to be. When Brooks set out to describe the differences between red and blue America—by driving a whopping sixty-five miles from Bethesda, Maryland, to Franklin County, Pennsylvania—he produced an article replete with seemingly knowing observations that turned out to be factually wrong. Brooks says few blue staters "could name even five NASCAR drivers"; but as reporter Sasha Issenberg noted in *Philadelphia* magazine, three of the five top markets for the Winston Cup are in blue states. Brooks says that red America is home shopping country, but it turns out that QVC's audiences skew toward affluent, suburban blue staters. Brooks says you can't spend more than $20 at a restaurant in Franklin County, when in fact it's possible to blow $50 on veal medallions and wild-rice pilaf at the bed-and-breakfast where Brooks himself had spent the night.

It's true that Brooks's conservatism leads him to smart ideas that a more liberal columnist probably wouldn't conceive. But it's also true that his hankering after movement cred accounts for most of what is dishonest and sloppy in his ideas. Eventually, Brooks will have to decide exactly who he wants to be.

From "Paradise Glossed," June 2004. Nicholas Confessore is now a reporter for the New York Times.

BENJAMIN WALLACE-WELLS ON BARACK OBAMA

Shortly after Barack Obama's keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, which catapulted him to political superstardom, Washington Monthly *editor Benjamin Wallace-Wells parsed the cultural ethos behind Obama's appeal and the extraordinary aspirations the public had hung on a new generation of African American politicians.*

Cory Booker was feeling good. The one time Newark, New Jersey, mayoral candidate had just given a widely lauded speech at a youth vote event at the Democratic National Convention in Boston. The party's kingmakers and talent scouts, who had taken an interest in the career of this young, handsome African American Rhodes scholar during his campaign two years ago, were thrilled to see him, and eager to game out with him how Booker might win his next run. "Operatives, glad-handers, and hacks," Booker recalled happily. When he talked to men and particularly women, they had a glimmer of awe in their eyes, as if a conversation with Booker might be a remembered event, something they'd someday recount for their kids. He could feel his head swelling, but it was okay to let your head swell sometimes, for a moment or two. And now here were two more excited white women, mouths open, and ready to gush. Booker leaned back and smiled his big, easy smile, and one of the women stuck out her hand. "I just wanted to congratulate you on your speech," she said. "It was so stirring—Mr. Obama."

"My head," Booker told me recently, compressing his hands to mimic a vice, "returned to its present size." Beyond sharing light skin, Barack Obama and Cory Booker look nothing alike. Obama, the Democratic candidate for Senate in Illinois, is rail thin, with short, Brillo-like hair; his precise features and scrawny neck make him look like a bobblehead doll. Booker, who was a Pac-10 tight end, is thick and broad shouldered, with a clean-shaven head. Obama is reserved, rhetorically smooth, and on message; Booker comes across as more eager, less experienced, and a little rougher around the edges. But the women's confusion wasn't just another embarrassing example of whites being unable to tell one black guy from another, or the more forgivable mistake arising from the fact that on that night, everyone at the convention was dying to meet Obama, the keynote speaker. For despite their physical differences, Booker and Obama share something fundamental: they are black people whom white Americans can actually picture being president.

* * *

Of course, it is often said that America isn't ready for a black president. And it is true that most of today's most prominent African American politicians would have a hard time winning large numbers of white votes, both because of lingering racial resentments and a sense among whites that black politicians don't necessarily share their values and interests. Yet there are a few black politicians for whom their race isn't a ball and chain, but a jet engine—the feature that launches them into stardom. For all of Colin Powell's gifts as a soldier and diplomat, he probably would not consistently rank as the most admired public official in America if he were white. For all of Obama's brilliance and eloquence, it is hard to imagine that he would be a national figure at this early stage of his career, if not for his African father.

For this small group of black politicians, race has been an advantage because whites see in them confirmation that America, finally, is working. Blacks, after all, aren't just any minority, the moral equivalent of Asian-Pacific Islanders but six times the size. They are the victims of much of our country's most vicious oppression, the cause of our deepest historical divisions, the stubborn counterexample that suggests our

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system isn't as fair or just as we would like it to be. The act of redressing these injustices has absorbed much of the political and emotional energy in America for 150 years. And while all Americans can take some pride in what racial progress African Americans have made in recent years, what whites—and indeed blacks—really want is for the whole awful nightmare to be behind them. The ultimate proof that we have finally done so would be for a black person to be elected president of the United States. In Barack Obama or Colin Powell, whites, giddily, begin to see not only figures who can command both white and black votes but also the promise of a real racial unity. Their candidacies are thrilling because they carry with them the notion that the symbolic gap between the races may be beginning to close.

The handful of black politicians who tap this vein of political yearning share certain qualities. They have all been highly successful within the postwar institutions that have done the most to integrate American society: the U.S. military and elite universities. Consequently, all give off the sense that they have transcended traditional racial categories, by signaling in their speech and demeanor, their personal narratives and career achievements, that they fully share in the culture and values of mainstream America; they are able to transcend race through the simple fact of their class. Just as importantly, they also transcend ideology by declaring with their rhetoric and policy positions a self-conscious independence from the conventional politics of their parties.

• • •

In early October, I watched Obama give a speech and take questions at a forum in downtown Chicago, in a black church with stained-glass windows of Jesus saving whites. The audience was a Chicago out of an early Saul Bellow novel: old Polish men with huge hearing aids, union-looking guys with thick, bristling mustaches, conservative bankers who asked pointed questions about Israel, black aunts bused in church vans from the West Side.

Before his audience, Obama told a fortyish man worrying about taxes that government will have to do more to help the middle class, not less, and that limiting taxes shouldn't be his narrow political priority. He told a white-haired woman peace activist who criticizes Israel that the Palestinians are in the wrong, and then when this appears to encourage a pro-Israel man, tells that guy that the Israelis are far from perfect, too. Obama was measured throughout; he tends to come off as an expert and wonk, an earnest, hopeful policy nerd. A group of older black women asked, humbly, for vague assurances that he would redirect federal housing policy to emphasize low-rise, rather than high-rise, projects—most housing advocates think low-rise buildings would be easier to police and maintain, and encourage more neighborly interactions. The grandmas were throwing him a softball, hoping only for a signal that he was open to their concerns, that he would side with the experts. Obama was having none of it. "Low rise isn't going to solve all your problems," Obama said sternly. "I've worked in the projects, and, let me tell you, low rise has problems of its own." The particular lady who had asked the question looked rebuked, and there was a surprised wince in the church: did he really just say that to a bunch of trapped-in-the-projects grandmas?

"Obama tells you the hard truths, and other politicians, particularly from Chicago, they tend to tell you what they think you want to hear," Lowell Jacobs told me. Jacobs is a retired plumber in Rock Falls, Illinois, a grimy old steel mill town at the western edge of Dennis Hastert's district; he is also the chair of the Democratic county commission, and was one of only two chairmen outside of the Chicago region to endorse Obama in the Democratic primary this year. "Barack's got something different," Jacobs told me. "He makes you feel like he's not a politician, but a leader."

• • •

Certainly, there's a not-quite-ready quality that has dogged the most promising black politicians who have come before Obama on the national stage: Doug Wilder hadn't yet figured out his politics. Colin Powell got cold feet. Cory Booker, in his first run, showed he didn't yet have the political skills. Harold Ford reached too high, too fast, with too little support. The quality that these leaders share is uncomfortably close to the fear we all have about affirmative action, the worry that in our desire to integrate blacks into our leadership, we elevate some too quickly before they're fully prepared.

But, like it or not, that's just how American politics works, and always has. In the late nineteenth century, the Republican Party was operating a shameless affirmative action program for retired Union generals from Ohio. The result was a string of mediocre presidents. In the late twentieth century, Democratic Party politics created a powerful market for moderate southern governors. The result was one middling president, Jimmy Carter, and one pretty good one, Clinton. Politics has its archetypes and its demands, and they will be heard. There's now an emerging market for a certain kind of black president, the fulfillment of which will be both harder and, potentially, more powerful than any archetype we've seen before. It might be Obama, or it might be Cory Booker, or it might be someone else entirely. But chances are, somewhere in America, that person is watching Obama's career carefully, and dreaming.

From "The Great Black Hope," November 2004. Benjamin Wallace-Wells is now a national affairs correspondent for Rolling Stone.

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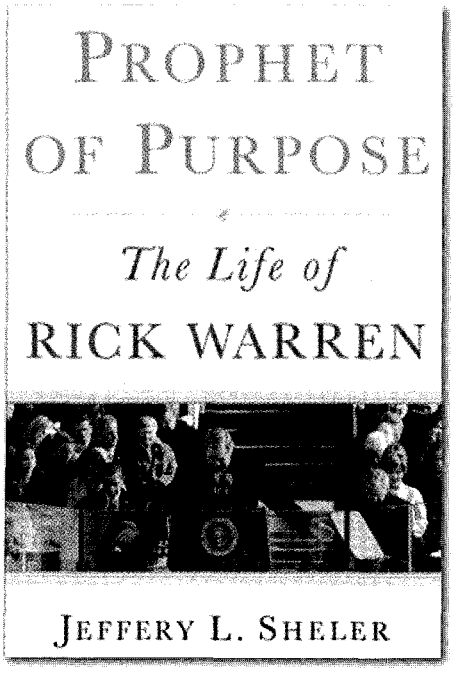
America's Preacher



Prophet of Purpose: The Life of Rick Warren
by Jeffery L. Sheler
Doubleday Religion, 336 pp.

How Rick Warren made it.

By Amy Sullivan

For a man who is arguably the most famous religious leader in the world after the pope and the Dalai Lama, evangelical preacher Rick Warren remains a surprising enigma. Is he just a kinder, gentler, Hawaiian-shirt-clad version of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson? Or is he the face of a new evangelicalism that represents a break from the Religious Right? Is he the nonpartisan above-the-fray leader who delivered the invocation at Barack Obama's inauguration? Or is he the conservative activist who inserted himself into the debate over Proposition 8 (the California ballot measure rejecting gay marriage) and courts influence with Republican politicians?

It's hard to know what to make of the megachurch pastor and best-selling author, in large part because Warren's message and image change based on his audience. Given his ever-rising profile as friend of presidents and global AIDS policy advocate, a book that tried to explain and pin down Warren would be a welcome resource. Fortunately, veteran religion journalist Jeffery L. Sheler has just written *Prophet of Purpose: The Life of Rick Warren* with plenty of fresh information about the man. Unfortunately, the book is a frustratingly incomplete account that never truly grapples with Warren and the role he has assumed in American culture and politics.

What Sheler does do is provide a well-written story of Rick Warren's life—from five-year-old Ricky's baptism, to his teen years (during which Rick dreamed of becoming either a rock musician or a politician), on through the long slow struggle to build a church from a handful of friends gathered in a living room to a congregation of more than 25,000. Sheler draws on hours of interviews with Warren, as well as close access to family members and friends. The result is an uncritical biography that will doubtless appeal to many of the more than 30 million people who bought Warren's blockbuster book *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?*

In a sense, Sheler has written a religious version of Richard Ben Cramer's *What It Takes*, the classic campaign book that sought to explain what kind of man thinks he not only could be but should be president. In Warren's case, the question is what kind of man believes that he can build a megachurch from scratch, write best-selling books, and—in his latest and most audacious effort—mobilize volunteers from churches around the world to combat everything from poverty to sex trafficking.

The answer is: the kind of man who would give you a heart attack if you spent too much time around him. Warren has a history of taking gigantic leaps of faith based on hunches or what he discerns is God's will for him. In the most famous example, Warren was a twenty-six-year-old pastor with no congregation when he declared in 1980 that he would build and lead a church of 20,000 members that would be located on at least fifty acres of land in Orange County. For Rick Warren, no ambition ever seems too daunting.

That same kind of grand vision appears in Warren's personal life as well. He met his wife, Kay, when they both attended California Baptist University, the only Southern Baptist school on the West Coast. At the time, Kay was dating Rick's best friend,

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and had barely registered on Rick's radar. But one day, he felt God telling him that Kay was the woman he was going to marry. So Rick waited until she and his friend broke up, asked her out, and then proposed. Kay, not having heard that same voice of God, was less enthusiastic. But she prayed about it and felt God telling her that she should say yes and feelings for Rick would follow. They didn't—not in the beginning, at least—but the two were married anyway.

Warren has always relied on the force of his personality and an outsized confidence to convince others to join him in achieving his visions. Over the course of seven years, he and the members of Saddleback Church pursued several multimillion-dollar tracts of land in Orange County on which to build a permanent church complex. Year after year, Warren led his congregants through fund-raising drives, telling them they had to "prepare for a miracle." Some congregants took on second jobs to contribute, while others sold their homes and moved into smaller houses. Never backing down from the scale of his goal, Warren eventually raised the millions of dollars from church members, enough to buy the land and begin construction.

The building of his megachurch occupies the first fifteen years of Warren's ministry, so it makes sense that Sheler devotes significant space to the effort. But Warren's relentless focus on achieving the goal he set out for himself makes for jarring reading, as if there were no other cause worth summoning a miracle for, nothing else for which to rally the resources of church members except their own church institution. It's a narrow, inward-looking orientation at odds with Warren's current reputation as an advocate for global social justice.

Warren experienced two major events that helped mold him into the figure he is now. The first was the 2002 publication of *The Purpose Driven Life*, which sold 25 million copies in the first three years and made Warren an overnight celebrity. He was already well known in the evangelical world for his church-building skill. As far back as high school, Warren had attracted attention for developing materials teaching other students how to establish Christian youth clubs at their schools. He led conferences and trainings for other pastors, and his previous book, *The Purpose Driven Church*, sold more than a million copies, an unheard-of feat for a book that was essentially a manual for church leaders.

But the appearance of *The Purpose Driven Life* on the best-seller lists made Warren a mainstream star as well. Soon he was appearing on *Larry King Live*, fielding speaking invitations from the Aspen Institute and the Davos World Economic Forum, and joining the Council on Foreign Relations. The attention was heady; before long, Warren was referring to himself as a "statesman" and listing his professional credits on his Web site as "pastor, author, global strategist, innovator, and philanthropist." He put together a team of staff members to focus on "strategic outreach" and connect him with power players, particularly in Washington.

Warren tells Sheler that around the same time, in 2003, he had an epiphany that he wasn't doing anything with his ministry to help the poor. Like many megachurches, Saddleback provided services galore for its members, including marriage counseling and job training. But the church did very little for the surrounding community and virtually nothing for the poorest in the larger society. To Warren's credit, he embraced the idea of applying the vast resources of his church members to social causes. Just a few years later, thousands of Saddleback members have taken part in short-term mission trips abroad, and each week approximately 9,500 congregants participate in service projects around Orange County.

At this point, it would be helpful to get some indication from Sheler of whether these two sides of Warren—mover-and-shaker and tough-on-poverty pastor—are both authentic parts of the same whole. But Sheler doesn't interview any critics of Warren, nor does he share any insights as an intelligent longtime observer of the evangelical world. So we are left to discover the real Rick Warren on our own.

Like a man with a pathological need to be liked, Warren has a habit of shading his comments to agree with whomever he's speaking to at a given moment. The practice may come from his pastoral experience, but even more from a desire to prove that he's not one of "those" evangelicals. He's California casual. He has an easy laugh. He hugs people. A lot. As Sheler describes him, "Here was an evangelical leader—a Southern Baptist, no less—who simply did not fit the stereotype of the dour Religious Right activist or of the money-grubbing TV preacher that so often seemed to dominate media portraits of evangelical Christians and their leaders."

Year after year, Warren led his congregants through fund-raising drives, telling them they had to "prepare for a miracle." Some congregants took on second jobs to contribute, while others sold their homes and moved into smaller houses.

As a result, when he's talking to Larry King, Warren mentions his gay friends and says he "never once even gave an endorsement in the two years Prop 8 was going." And when he's talking to Sean Hannity, Warren voices his agreement when the Fox News Channel host advocates assassinating the president of Iran. When he speaks with scientists, Warren assures them that he believes in a biblically informed theory of evolution. But when he talks to the intelligent design devotees at the Discovery Institute, they leave with the impression that he believes in intelligent design instead.

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GETTING WHAT WE DESERVE

Health & Medical Care in AMERICA

Former Dean, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health
Alfred Sommer, M.D., M.H.S.

One of America's leading public health experts finds a host of ills in this country's health care system. In his blunt assessment of the state of public health in America, **Alfred Sommer** argues that human behavior has a stronger effect on wellness than almost any other factor.

WRONG PLACE, WRONG TIME

TRAUMA AND VIOLENCE IN THE LIVES OF YOUNG BLACK MEN

JOHN A. RICH
M.D., M.P.H.

"**John Rich**, who has devoted so much of his career to the study of violence—especially in men of color—challenges us to see beyond the injuries and the anger and to hear and appreciate the plight of these men and to understand that they, like us, seek a place of safety in their lives."
—David Satcher, M.D., Ph.D., 16th Surgeon General of the United States

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When it comes to gay marriage, Warren dearly wants to be a Southern Baptist who believes that marriage should be between a man and a woman, but also a man whose gay friends understand he's not intolerant. It is that conflicting impulse that got him into hot water last year after the California ballot proposition banning gay marriage passed. Eight days before election day, Warren was very clear in an online video message to his congregation: "Let me say this really clearly: We support Proposition 8. If you believe what the Bible says about marriage, you need to support Proposition 8."

After the election, Warren spoke to Beliefnet's Steven Waldman about his support for the initiative and went even further, telling Waldman, "I'm opposed to having a brother and sister being together and calling that marriage. I'm opposed to an older guy marrying a child and calling that marriage. I'm opposed to one guy having multiple wives and calling that marriage." Waldman responded by asking, "Do you think those are equivalent to gays getting married?" "Oh, I do," answered Warren.

When it comes to gay marriage, Warren dearly wants to be a Southern Baptist who believes that marriage should be between a man and a woman, but also a man whose gay friends understand he's not intolerant.

Critics pointed to those comments when Warren was asked to offer the invocation at Obama's inauguration, with the harshest accusing him of being an "anti-gay bigot" and "a vicious homophobe." Many gay-rights advocates demanded that Obama rescind his invitation and leave Warren out of the swearing-in ceremony. Warren complained that he was being unfairly attacked, protesting to *Christianity Today* that "I never said a word about [Prop 8] until the eight days before the election, and then I did make a video for my own people when they asked, 'How should we vote on this?' It was a pastor talking to his own people." The problem with that defense, however, is that Warren didn't just talk to "his own people." He posted the video on his church's heavily trafficked Web site, where all the world could see it.

Warren clearly believes he is the heir to Billy Graham's role as national pastor. He told Sheler about receiving a package from Graham a week before Obama's inauguration. "Inside, carefully wrapped, was a charcoal-colored Homburg hat made of crisp fur felt with a stiff narrow brim and a satin band ... Tucked inside was a note from Billy Graham. 'This is the hat I wore at all the inaugurations,' wrote Graham, who had prayed at four of the events, more than any other modern churchman. 'It's your turn, Rick. It's your hat now.'"

Despite the embarrassing release of audiotapes that revealed Graham making anti-Semitic comments in a conversation with Richard Nixon, Graham has managed to remain a widely admired religious leader because he was largely seen as free from political entanglements and agendas. Warren is still learning—sometimes painfully—how to navigate his new role as a celebrity pastor whose even offhand comments can reach an audience of millions. But we will have to wait for another book to tell us whether he learned anything from the experience, and what we should make of the nation's most prominent pastor. WM

Amy Sullivan, a *Time* magazine senior editor and a *Washington Monthly* contributing editor, is the author of *The Party Faithful*.

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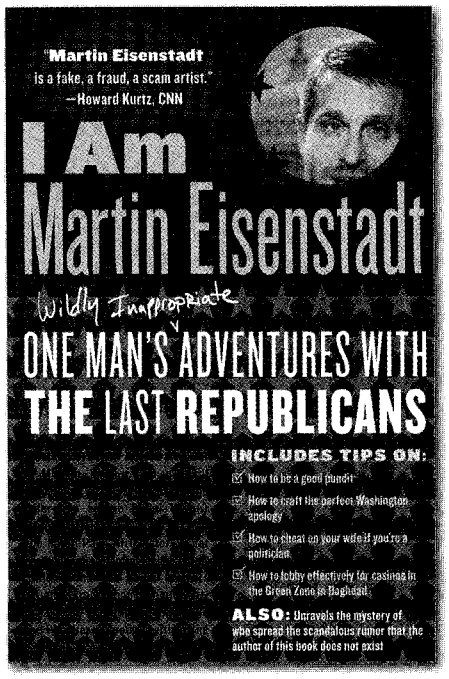
True Lies

The best recent memoir from Republican Washington is a hoax. That should tell you something.

By Joshua Green



I Am Martin Eisenstadt: One Man's (Wildly Inappropriate) Adventures with the Last Republicans

by Martin Eisenstadt
Faber & Faber, 336 pp.

The 2008 presidential election will be remembered for a lot of things, but moments of levity aren't one of them. The highlight may have come in the days just after Obama's victory, when bitter McCain staffers launched a torrent of anonymous criticism at Sarah Palin that painted her as selfish, venal, arrogant, and, above all, criminally stupid. For many of us, what erased the last shred of doubt about Palin—what seared in our cerebral cortex the unshakable conviction that Tina Fey was channeling the real person—was a Fox News report in which anonymous McCain staffers revealed that Palin had thought Africa was a country.

Not long afterward, a McCain staffer named Martin Eisenstadt came forward to take responsibility for leaking the Africa stuff. At first blush, Eisenstadt seemed exactly the sort you'd expect to cruelly betray his candidate: a vaguely familiar, middle-tier neocon hack affiliated with an outfit called the Harding Institute for Freedom and Democracy—a guy whose natural place in the universe is on the third block of *Hardball*, his command of the latest GOP talking points and lapel-pin flag both obnoxiously on display. That was enough for MSNBC, the *Los Angeles Times*, and a host of other media outlets to run with the story that the culprit had been found.

The only trouble was that Martin Eisenstadt was not a McCain adviser or even a real person. He was a hoax perpetrated by two filmmakers, Dan Mirvish and Eitan Gorlin (who played Eisenstadt on television). The Harding Institute didn't exist, nor did the Eisenstadt Group political consulting firm, though phony evidence of both can be found online. It was all an elaborate ruse that worked to perfection. The media made the obligatory hiccup of remorse and hurried on. But the hoax was worth savoring because it was funny on so many levels. Not only did it embarrass a facile media—which is not, let's be honest, like putting a man on the moon—but it slyly mocked American political culture in a way that barely registered. The joke was not that an imposter could infiltrate cable news for as long as Martin Eisenstadt did. It was that our entire system of politics has become so mindlessly rote, and campaigns such stage-managed shams, that *it didn't really matter* whether the guy spouting talking points on *Hardball* was the real deal or a fraud. Both said exactly the same thing.

"Martin Eisenstadt" could have hung it up right there, assured of immortality as a curious footnote to a historic campaign. But Mirvish and Gorlin evidently had too much fun. They're back—or, rather, Eisenstadt is back—with what purports to be a tell-all memoir of the campaign. The shtick in *I Am Martin Eisenstadt* is that Eisenstadt won't cop to being a hoax—it was all a misunderstanding, we're told, a sinister campaign by a liberal blogger to discredit him. Now, with the election over, Eisenstadt, like any good political hack, wants to "set the record straight" and make a quick buck while he's at it.

This is a much harder stunt to pull off. Getting readers to commit to a story for 300-plus pages when they're already in on the joke demands skill and cunning. But as the original hoax suggested, Eisenstadt's creators are shrewd observers of Washington, and they delight in sending up its countless absurdities, particularly in the universe

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Eitan Gorlin as "Martin Eisenstadt," conservative pundit extraordinaire.

of Republicans. They begin by fleshing out Martin Eisenstadt, who turns out to be the product of an illicit affair by a promiscuous secretary for John Ehrlichman. Young Marty is raised, Tarzan style, by Nixon henchmen. Imbued with these values, he naturally excels in the Reagan years and eventually fulfills his promise by becoming a rotten-to-the-core Republican consultant.

Eisenstadt worships Lee Atwater and eagerly embraces the full panoply of vices and ethical failings that characterize the very worst of the pundit-consultant class. He is lazy, sexist, opportunistic, and disloyal. He's mean to his staff and always poised to dump his current candidate if a better one comes along. The only thing he desires more than a rich foreign client to bankroll his lifestyle by enlisting his "professional services" is the singular glory of cable-news prominence. Eisenstadt is something like a poor man's Jack Abramoff. In other words, he's a wonderful narrator.

The book's driving conceit is that Eisenstadt is a Zelig-like figure who happens to have been at the center of every meaningful political event in the past couple years, usually to the detriment of whomever he was ostensibly trying to help. This affords the opportunity to skewer the major conservative figures and many liberal ones, too. Rudy Giuliani's abortive campaign, Sarah Palin's disastrous turn in the spotlight, and John McCain's landslide loss all trace their descent to Eisenstadt's cretinous incompetence.

As he zigzags between campaigns, ticking off his colleagues' indiscretions and settling imaginary scores, Eisenstadt spins his own yarn in an attempt to explain how he mistakenly came to be thought of as a hoax. Here, the plot gets a bit zany and hard to follow because Eisenstadt weaves together outrageous and clearly fabricated anecdotes that usually involve notable Beltway personages—binge-drinking with Donna Brazile, for instance—with footnoted links to actual YouTube videos in which he appears and blog posts from real bloggers who got taken in. The book drags when it detours into descriptions of blog fights, which overwhelm the authors' considerable comedic talents (and demonstrate once again why bloggers—even fake ones—need editors). But this is a minor gripe. The real business here is tweaking the bizarre culture of Republican Washington since Nixon, and a phony consultant turns out to be a good vehicle for the job.

I Am Martin Eisenstadt is an odd mixture of high and low comedy that, on balance, is pitched at about the level of a Judd Apatow movie. If you don't find the idea of Dennis Hastert oil-wrestling the Turkish foreign minister to be inherently funny, this probably isn't your book. On the other hand, the authors know Washington so well that if you're a creature of the Beltway you can't help but admire their curator's appreciation for the tiniest details. Anyone can milk humor from the idea that Republicans are greedy and corrupt. Only connoisseurs of conservative excess would think to parody the warped machismo of the Reagan years that led members of the preppy youth group Young Americans for Freedom (including Grover Norquist) to visit Angola on behalf of the UNITA rebels and style themselves "freedom fighters," which mainly seems to have entailed being photographed with an AK-47. Martin Eisenstadt's machine-gun-brandishing picture appears on page 15.

What's consistently funny about the book is that for all that Martin Eisenstadt is an obvious parody, there is a striking similarity between his character and demeanor and those of many of the people you routinely encounter in green rooms and cocktail parties around Washington. This time, like the last time, the joke goes both ways. That's why I intend it as real praise when I say that *I Am Martin Eisenstadt* is the best fake memoir of the campaign season. WM

Joshua Green is a senior editor of the *Atlantic* and a contributing editor of the *Washington Monthly*.

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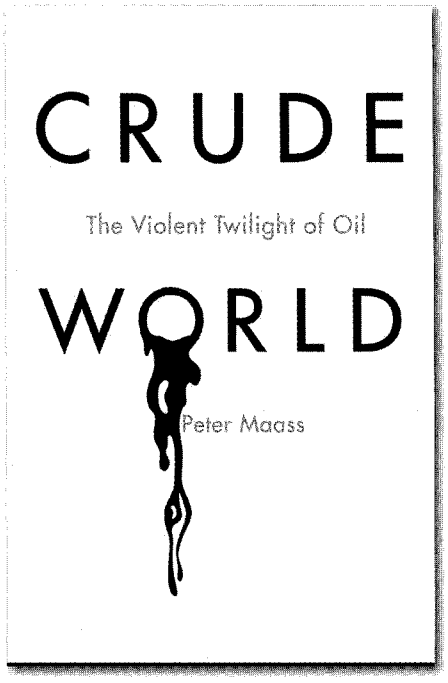
Bottom of the Barrel

Why the Saudis wish they'd discovered water instead.

By Charles Homans



Crude World: The Violent Twilight of Oil

by Peter Maass
Alfred A. Knopf, 288 pp.

The world's first oil well was drilled 150 years ago on a farm two miles outside the wooded hamlet of Titusville, Pennsylvania, by a man named Edwin L. Drake. Drake was forty years old, an erstwhile railroad conductor and a gifted huckster; he arrived in Pennsylvania's logging country with a bogus title—Colonel E. L. Drake—to better impress the locals. His financiers had mostly written him off by August 1859 when, more than a year after he started his work, Drake finally struck oil. The farmers who worked along Oil Creek came running to witness the future bubbling up greasily from the pasture.

What happened next—recounted in detail in *The Prize*, Daniel Yergin's 1991 doorstop of an oil history—was dizzying. Speculators rushed to buy every available scrap of land in what became known as Pennsylvania's Oil Regions, goaded by tales of miraculous good fortune—one well had repaid $15,000 on the dollar over less than two years of production. The state's oil output more than sextupled between 1860 and 1862. Up in New York, there wasn't enough office space on Wall Street to accommodate all the new companies the industry was spawning.

But if some colossal fortunes—most notably John D. Rockefeller's—were made on Pennsylvania oil, far more were ruined by it. The fever of speculation, coupled with the unpredictability of the new industry, caused prices to plummet from $10 a barrel to 10 cents over a span of just one year, then shoot up again. In one Pennsylvania boomtown, a plot of land that was worth almost nothing in 1864 was sold for $2 million a year later, then again for less than $5 thirteen years after that. The upheavals ultimately swallowed up Edwin Drake himself; the man who first drilled the industry into existence had a brief, disastrous run as an oil buyer on Wall Street, and just seven years after he hit oil was reduced to begging money from his friends. James Townsend, the Connecticut banker who funded Drake's work, fared better, but no less bitterly; "the suffering and anxiety I experienced," he later wrote, "I would not repeat for a fortune."

While contemporaneously volatile Gilded Age industries, such as railroads, have long since settled into normalcy, oil remains afflicted by the paradox that Drake stumbled across a century and a half ago: the people who should theoretically reap the greatest benefit from oil are often the ones who suffer the most on account of it. Of the world's top ten oil-exporting countries, only Norway can claim to have an open, democratic society and a transparent government; only Norway and the United Arab Emirates rank in the IMF's top ten for gross domestic product per capita. Seven of the top ten, meanwhile, are rated as "in danger" on the Failed States Index compiled this summer by the Fund for Peace and *Foreign Policy* magazine. "All in all," Sheik Ahmed Yamani, the oil minister of Saudi Arabia from 1962 to 1986, once grumbled, "I wish we had discovered water."

This is the thing that interests Peter Maass in *Crude World: The Violent Twilight of Oil*. "I lived in Asia for several years and wondered, if oil was such a blessing to countries possessing it, how South Korea, which has no oil, became an economic tiger, as well as Japan, whose oil reserves are minuscule," he writes. Oil-rich Iran, meanwhile, has endured political upheavals, war, and—indignity of indignities—gasoline shortages amid

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an overflow of unrefined crude. Nigeria, the world's ninth-biggest oil exporter, has seen 80 percent of its oil wealth go to 1 percent of its population, according to the World Bank; the country has a lower GDP per capita than Senegal, which mostly exports fish and nuts.

Economists and international development types have spent years trying to quantify, prove, and disprove this phenomenon, known as the "resource curse"; the notion that access to natural riches creates not prosperity in the nations that have it, but rather poverty, instability, and corruption. How it happens is easy enough to understand. Resource markets are often volatile, and people with ready access to natural wealth have few incentives to come up with more innovative or diversified means of making money—why build Silicon Valley when you can sit back and collect revenue checks off the uranium deposits in the backyard? (You don't have to go halfway around the world to see how this works—take a look at the economic indicators for West Virginia's coal country.) In developing countries, lucrative resource exports also tend to strengthen local currencies, which hurts industrial and agricultural exports and worsens resource dependency.

Oil brings its own particular problems, too. Once the drilling and shipping infrastructure is online it doesn't require much manpower to keep the crude flowing, which means that oil-rich countries can, and usually do, enjoy both high GDP and high unemployment. If populations grow too much, wealth becomes a zero-sum game, which explains why oil has made the relatively few citizens of Kuwait prosperous and happy, while populous Saudi Arabia foments a worsening stew of middle-class ennui. And of course oil's centrality to national security means the stakes are always high—it's been awhile since anyone accused the United States of overthrowing a government on account of a cobalt mine.

Maass, a veteran war correspondent for the *New York Times Magazine* and the author of *Love Thy Neighbor*, one of the first and best book-length journalistic treatments of the Balkan conflicts of the '90s, is chiefly interested in the miseries that these market forces visit upon the people and places in their path. This concern with the micro over the macro makes *Crude World* something of an anachronism among recent oil books. Climate change goes almost unmentioned save for a few pages in the conclusion; Maass spends an early chapter on peak oil, in which he endorses the theory that we have most likely already passed it, but then moves on.

Maass's main preoccupation is the surreal, dysfunctional society that has grown up around the international petroleum industry, and at its best *Crude World* offers an unflinching depiction of it. The most striking aspect of his account is how unchanged this society is from one country to another, a self-contained world which from Port Harcourt to Baku is inhabited by the same broad categories of residents—Texan engineers in SUVs, migrant workers from low-wage countries like India and the Philippines, a mostly interchangeable cast of local political buffoons—living in the same prefab communities of fortified hotels and private militias, bankrolled by the same handful of companies. It is nothing less than the skeleton of modern civilization; the only thing more impressive than its architecture is its invisibility to anyone who isn't looking for it—or living in the shadow of it.

Maass frames his book as a "journey into oil," and at the outset it is an engrossing one, equal parts *Heart of Darkness* and *Mad Max*. Maass visits the Niger Delta in Nigeria, a country which, prior to the discovery of oil, seemed to have bright prospects, and now contains four times as many guns as computers. He travels up the delta's network of oil-choked creeks in a canoe with members of a rebel militia engaged in a long-running pitched battle with Royal Dutch/Shell, the largest player in Nigeria's oil industry. The landscape is apocalyptic, lousy with tangled pipelines, the creek banks lit with burning gas flares. Nigerian soldiers stand guard on a Halliburton drilling barge. Maass's canoe passes an island shantytown—dubbed Little Russia—full of prostitutes who service the soldiers and oil workers on the mainland.

A Potemkin village built by Shell to demonstrate its investments in the local community is mostly derelict; the company has provided a health clinic but no resources to operate it, an electrical generator but no fuel. The rebels, meanwhile, style themselves as agents of environmental and social justice, but are just as dependent on the oilfields as Shell is. The industry supports them indirectly by way of the pipelines they illicitly tap, and directly through kidnapping ransom payments and infrastructure protection rackets; "It was an Escher schematic of recirculated violence," Maass writes.

Maass has an admirable empathy for his subjects, and he extends it—though not uncritically—to the ostensible villains in his story. "I liked most [oil] executives I met," he writes. He correctly identifies the main difference between oilmen and less rapacious professionals as one of circumstance: "If you want to alter the behavior of an executive who usually follows the highest ethical standards, just give him a briefcase and tell him that his job depends on his winning an oil contract in a country that is not Norway." This moral complexity has its limits—the oil business's routine claim that it is simply going to the necessary lengths to provide a product that everyone needs is badly undercut by the industry's long-running efforts to break the political will for the kind of renewable energy expansion that could lessen that dependency—but Maass's basic point stands. As any cell phone manufacturer trying to get coltan out of the Democratic Republic of Congo could tell you, the moral distance between an oil buyer and a Nokia executive is a lot shorter than you might think.

Still, Maass provides plenty of reasons to feel less than charitable toward the guys. Most damning is his account of the transformation of Equatorial Guinea, which only became an oil exporter in the '90s—"by which time," Maass writes, "the world's politicians, bankers and oilmen had promised to do a better job." If you think this is actually going to happen, of course, you haven't been paying attention. Instead, the American government, several U.S.-based oil companies, and Riggs Bank (whose main branch was across the street from the U.S. Treasury in Washington until Riggs was absorbed by PNC Financial Services in 2005) find themselves kowtowing

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to the brutal regime of President Teodoro Obiang in the name of uninterrupted oil shipments. In the town of Ebebiyin, Maass watches phalanxes of ExxonMobil, Halliburton, ChevronTexaco, Marathon Oil, and Total employees march behind Obiang's motorcade in a parade honoring the president. This is the sort of thing that most companies' PR flacks would not be thrilled to hear about: Obiang is a low-rent military dictator who displayed his predecessor in a cage at a public movie theater before executing him, used his country's oil revenues to buy a personal Boeing 737 with gold-plated bathroom fixtures, and may have eaten one of his enemies.

Obiang's subjects, meanwhile, have barely benefited from the boom in Equatorial Guinea, something which is only partly Obiang's doing—it's cheaper and easier for the oil companies to import foreign workers and establish their own supply chains independent of the Equatorial Guinean economy. "The plant—like most oil installations in the developing world—could have been on the moon for all the benefit it offered local businesses," Maass writes of one natural gas facility. "Those are local rocks," the Texan plant manager tells him, pointing to the roadside gravel at the worksite, "but importing them would be cheaper."

Unfortunately, once Maass leaves Africa, *Crude World* feels less like a journey and more like an overbooked weekend getaway. Maass proceeds through his multi-hemispheric oil-ravaged itinerary—Ecuador, Azerbaijan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and Venezuela—at breakneck speed, and the reader barely has time to take in the bleak scenery. It's too much material for a book clocking in at scarcely 200 pages before the endnotes, and there are telltale signs that *Crude World* took a lot of cuts in editing. Characters are treated to lengthy introductions only to offer up a brief quote or two and then abruptly disappear; scenes are cut off before they've had time to build any momentum. Some sections are clearly repurposed magazine articles that were originally about other things. A lengthy chapter on the travails of Iraq's oil ministry following the American invasion—Maass covered it, and was on hand to watch the Marines topple the statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad's Firdos Square—tells us plenty about the incompetence of the Coalition Provisional Authority, but not much new about oil (fact: Iraq has a lot of it).

Even when *Crude World* doesn't feel rushed, it often feels shallow. Maass has put in the time on his subject—in the introduction he says he worked on this book for the better part of a decade, and visited eleven countries in addition to the aforementioned half dozen. But you still get the sense that at the end of the day, he didn't quite get the story. The bulk of the people he speaks with are official talking heads who acquiesce to brief and useless interviews, leaving him to speculate on the real motives behind their on-the-record bromides. The best muckraking in *Crude World* borrows from earlier work by reporters who have had better luck prying loose the secrets of the oil industry, such as *Harper's Magazine*'s Ken Silverstein; otherwise, that world remains frustratingly opaque here. In one odd scene, Maass attends the gala dinner event at an industry conference in Houston, makes a few notes about the menu and the ExxonMobil CEO's keynote address, and apparently leaves without talking to anyone.

Nigeria, the world's ninth-biggest oil exporter, has seen 80 percent of its petroleum wealth go to 1 percent of its population. It has a lower GDP per capita than Senegal, which mostly exports fish and nuts.

The weakest part of this kind of reporter's book about energy is invariably the conclusion, in which the desire to sum everything up and offer at least some sliver of hope runs aground on the daunting complexity of, and lack of clear-cut solutions to, global warming, energy security, or any other of the increasingly existential problems posed by our fossil-fuel dependence. On this score *Crude World* is characteristic, offering a couple of narrow good-governance prescriptions and a vaguely optimistic anecdote involving wind turbines. "A world in which the priority is not getting oil but getting *off* oil would be better not only for the atmosphere but also, as I've seen, for the people who live in ... resource-rich nations," he writes.

It feels like a cop-out, in part because Maass himself has drawn far more interesting lessons from his reporting elsewhere. In a 2005 *Times Magazine* piece, he made the provocative argument that well-intentioned environmentalists who opposed drilling in pristine domestic wildernesses like the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge should think harder about whether it was right to do so—outsourcing oil production to other countries isolated Americans from the impacts of their petroleum-intensive lifestyle. "Perhaps a few more drilling platforms in our most precious lands and waters would make us understand that the true cost of oil is not posted at the gas pump," Maass wrote in the article. And a barrel that didn't come from a relatively responsibly managed operation like those in the United States, he pointed out, would have to come from an unregulated nightmare zone like the Niger Delta. Better a few displaced caribou than the wholesale ecological and economic destruction of another country.

In the end this is almost certainly a false choice—it's hard to believe that, sooner or later, we won't try to get our hands on every last drop of oil the earth has to offer—which may be why Maass left the argument out of *Crude World*. But there is something clarifying about putting the dilemma in those stark terms; the first step toward thinking productively about a problem of this magnitude is recognizing that none of the options will be remotely easy. WM

Charles Homans is an editor of the *Washington Monthly*.

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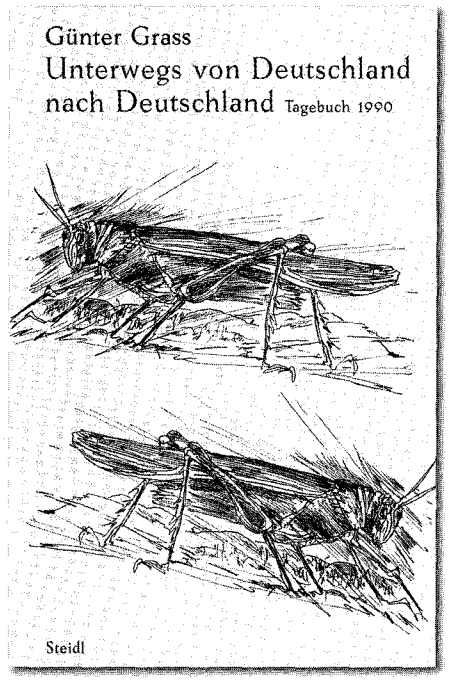
Germany's Cassandra



Unterwegs von Deutschland nach Deutschland: Tagebuch 1990

(On the Road From Germany to Germany: Diary 1990, German ed.)

by Günter Grass
Steidl Verlag, 255 pp.

Twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Günter Grass still thinks reunification was a bad idea.

By Paul Hockenos

Twenty years ago, writer Günter Grass, Germany's most noted Nobel laureate, began a special diary. The Berlin Wall, which had divided Germany for over a quarter century, had been torn down, unleashing huge questions about Germany's destiny and its place in the wider world. Grass felt that witness demanded to be kept. The opening of the German-German border gave him the previously unimaginable opportunity to travel through the German Democratic Republic during the brief, adrenaline-charged interregnum between the wall's fall (November 1989) and unification (October 1990). During that period, Grass—ever the public intellectual—was not only an observer but, as he has been since the postwar fifties, an active participant in the debate over the historically loaded German Questions.

The publication this year (in German only) of the Grass diaries, *Unterwegs von Deutschland nach Deutschland: Tagebuch 1990* (On the Road From Germany to Germany: Diary 1990), nearly two decades after German unification provide a thoughtful antidote to the flood of self-congratulation that is certain to accompany the anniversary celebrations this year and next. Those observations are stark, perhaps in retrospect overly so: Grass was one of the nation's most outspoken critics of unification and its architects—U.S. President George H. W. Bush, and the special object of Grass's reprobation, conservative West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, the undisputed father of unification.

It is hard today to imagine any other outcome than unification as it transpired, namely the eastern territories' total incorporation into the Federal Republic and the united Germany's immersion in NATO. There are few today who'd contest unification, who'd wish there were two Germanys again. But it is worth remembering that many German leftists, particularly those schooled in postwar West Germany, initially balked at the prospect of "reuniting" Germany at all, which was still, as they saw it, atoning for the sins of its recent past. Günter Grass, born in the Free City of Danzig (now Gdansk) in 1927, was a generation older than the skeptical baby boomers but no less cautious about rousing a virulent nationalism that postwar democratization may have mellowed but not purged.

In the diary, which is punctuated with Grass's own quirky ink sketchings, the then sixty-two-year-old embarks on a series of extended reading tours to eastern cities like Leipzig, Dresden, and Cottbus, as well as further-flung locales in the forests of Mark Brandenburg and along the coast of the Baltic Sea. He crisscrosses borders that had just weeks before been the Iron Curtain—the watchtowers still in place—where good-humored East German guards just wave his car through. One asks to have a copy of *The Tin Drum* autographed. Grass remarks with consternation at the eastern Germans' new obsession with products from the west, as if a carton of milk with advertising on it were better than milk from a state-run cooperative in unadorned packaging. "The money, the money's got to come," a Leipzig taxi driver tells him. "It doesn't matter how; the main thing is the money."

Like just about everyone on the German left, Grass is shocked when the freshly liberated easterners throw their first democratic vote behind the West German–backed conservatives, spurning not only the Social Democrats but also the courageous dissidents who were the catalyst for the peaceful revolution of autumn 1989. The conservative landslide sets the stage for unification, thereafter a question of how and not whether. Grass shakes his

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head in disbelief as his good friend Willy Brandt, the world-famous Social Democrat and elder statesman, welcomes German unity, even appearing publicly alongside Kohl. Clearly, Germans are on a fast track to a one-sided unification.

Initially, Grass objects outright to settling the greatest of all German questions—the nation's proper borders—with a one-state solution. Now long forgotten, there was an array of options for the two Germanys under discussion in early 1990, including ideas of an independent, democratic GDR that coexisted alongside the mighty Federal Republic. Germany still owes a debt to humanity, Grass argued, namely the one it incurred as perpetrator of the Holocaust. Germany's division is the price it pays for Auschwitz. Like Brandt's drop to his knees at the Warsaw Uprising Memorial in 1970, division symbolizes Germany's guilt and ever-present acknowledgment of its wrongdoing.

More to the point, Grass doesn't trust a resurgent Germany in the heart of Europe. Like the Poles he grew up with, he fears the reemergence of a bellicose patria, one that might even dare to return its capital to Berlin, to once again fly its national colors without shame, and even to send Bundeswehr troops into foreign wars. (There were mainstream voices in the ruling Christian Democrats who wanted to renegotiate Germany's eastern border with Poland in order to grab back territories lost in the war.)

But as the year 1990 advances, unification of some sort becomes inevitable. Grass adjusts to the possibility of a loose German federation composed of both Germanys' federal states, under a new liberal constitution and geostrategically neutral. Yet this concept, too, bandied about briefly, is soon plowed under by the juggernaut of history, steered by Kohl and Bush. Grass is disgusted with his own Social Democrats' inability to formulate a viable alternative to the chancellor's *Anschluss*.

More than anything, the west's triumphal manner and the veneration of the deutschmark *über alles* galls Grass. He watches eastern Germans buy into Kohl's promise of "blossoming vistas" that are supposed to replace the grim wastelands of socialism. The easterners submit all too passively, he comments, merely exchanging one provider for another. The west's politicos shamelessly forgo the bare minimum of mutual respect: the promulgation of a new all-German constitution, something explicitly stipulated in West Germany's *Grundgesetz* in case of unification. The overnight introduction of the western currency—instead of the gradual transition Grass, among many others, advocated—exposes the shaky, in-transition eastern firms to competition they can't withstand. The state-run companies begin to go under one after another, unemployment skyrocketing before the ink is dry on the treaty.

On October 3, 1990, Grass writes sardonically, "Even a full moon on the Day of German Unification. Kohl gets his way on absolutely everything!" Grass—the "pessimist of the nation," as he is now called—appears on a prominent talk show that evening, the only reserved voice among the guests. "It was right to spit on their jolly unification parade," he remarks to his diary.

So, twenty years down the road, is it not obvious who was right and who was wrong—Grass, Germany's Cassandra, or unification's makers?

The first decade of unity turned out, as Grass predicted, to be a fiasco. Joblessness soared. Soon there were gaping "black holes," desperate regions with 35 percent unemployment, galloping depopulation, and plunging birthrates. Instead of an aboveboard privatization of state enterprises, they were sold off for a song; most never resumed operation. The buyers' origins told the story: 85 percent were western Germans, 10 percent were foreigners, and only 5 percent were easterners. On top of this, the *Ossis* were blamed for the mess, for being too dull-witted to pick up the tricks of the free market. (Indeed, the very name *Ossi*, which simply means "people from the east," became something of a pejorative.) Unification's real cost, an astronomical bill that the west's taxpayers would foot, was only beginning to come into focus.

The second decade of unification, however, saw a more vigorous economic upturn in much of the east, a result in part of enormous subsidized investments in infrastructure. Joblessness, though still higher than in most of the west, has tapered off and fallen, though the black holes still exist. Cities like Dresden and Chemnitz (formerly Karl-Marx-Stadt) are boomtowns, with comparable per capita incomes to districts of western Berlin and the Ruhrgebiet. There is no hint of political instability even though the reform communist party has made a surprising comeback as part of the new Left Party. It capitalizes on the lingering resentment that sits deep among easterners across the political spectrum. The far right, too, though on the margins, musters support among the have-nots in those depressed regions where anybody with skills or an education picked up and left in the 1990s.

Grass's gloomy prophecies about a sinister German nationalism proved off the mark. There was never a popular appetite in 1989 or 1990 to snatch back swathes of Poland or centralize the state in the Prussian style. Postwar democracy and the processes of introspection set into motion by critically minded intellectuals like Grass (his 1959-published *Tin Drum* was a defining moment) had civilized German nationalism and undermined its expansionist logic. In fact, one could even argue that Germany is the model nation in coming to terms with an unsavory past. Neither Italy, Spain, nor Japan, to say nothing of the likes of Romania and Slovakia, has begun to confront its fascist collaboration the way Germany has, even if the process transpired in fits and starts, nudged along by intellectuals like Grass. Germans do wave flags now—and no one cares. NATO allies demand they send *more* troops to Afghanistan's war zones, and it is the Germans who object.

Improbably, at the ripe age of eighty-two, this autumn Günter Grass undertook another tour of eastern Germany. In the hardest hit of backwater ex-socialist towns, where crumbling housing blocks and empty storefronts still line the streets, he reads from his 1990 diaries and even does a little stumping for the Social Democrats. Still the hardheaded contrarian, he feels largely vindicated in his dark prophecies from twenty years ago. Germany may be united on paper, he argues, but resentment and income disparity still divide the nation. He sees the glass as half full, at best. Clearly, after more than five decades, Citizen Grass refuses to give Germany's powerful a free ride. WM

Paul Hockenos is a writer living in Berlin, Germany. His latest book is *Joschka Fischer and the Making of the Berlin Republic: An Alternative History of Postwar Germany.*

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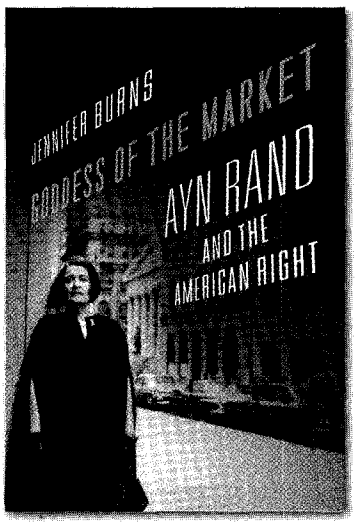
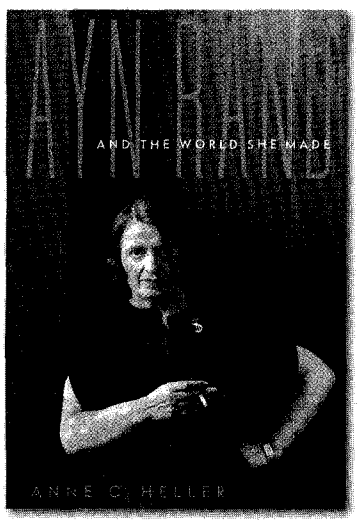
A Life of Contempt



Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American Right

by Jennifer Burns
Oxford University Press, 384 pp.



Ayn Rand and the World She Made

by Anne C. Heller
Nan A. Talese, 592 pp.

Ayn Rand's defining characteristic was hatred—for government, other people, and the very concept of human kindness.

By Michael O'Donnell

I began counting Ayn Rand's uses of the word "contempt" on page 43 of *The Fountainhead*, by which point it had already appeared four times, and twice on that page. The word shows up thirty-nine times more in the book, by my count, which probably missed at least a couple of deployments. Rand's villains and heroes smile contemptuously, throw back their heads and laugh contemptuously, and deem others too contemptible to be worth addressing. The most indelible image of contempt takes place when the novel's hero rapes its heroine in an act performed "in contempt, as a symbol of humiliation and conquest." If that were all, the scene would not be infamous. But the word reappears several sentences later: "the act of a master taking shameful, contemptuous possession of her was the kind of rapture she had wanted."

Disturbing as this man-worshipping desire to be raped is—and it is not Rand's only such scene—the most frequent use of contempt in her fiction is directed not at women but at the public, the masses. As the economist Ludwig von Mises wrote in praise of Rand's other major novel, *Atlas Shrugged*, "You have the courage to tell the masses what no politician told them: you are inferior and all the improvements in your conditions which you simply take for granted you owe to the effort of men who are better than you."

Overuse of this angry word is not Rand's only literary tic—her villains and weaklings tend to be fat or effeminate, and she has a fondness for courtroom showdowns. Moreover, critics have so thoroughly savaged her melodramatic, high-camp prose over the years that it seems ungenerous to focus on her writing at the level of the word and the phrase rather than the grand idea. But this particular tic is revealing, for as two new biographies show, Rand herself lived a life of contempt: for people, for ideas, for government, and for the very concept of human kindness. In the most famous (and overheated) denunciation of her work, the finger pointer Whittaker Chambers wrote in *National Review* that "from almost any page of *Atlas Shrugged*, a voice can be heard, from painful necessity, commanding: 'To a gas chamber—go!'" The great irony of Rand's life is that this woman who seemed to despise everyone beneath her became a cheerleader for democratic capitalism, a type of political economy that entrusts the fate of society to the unwashed masses themselves.

Chambers's hatchet piece—commissioned in an act of malicious mischief by William F. Buckley Jr., who disliked Rand's godlessness—was particularly cruel considering that Rand was a Russian Jew who had escaped the USSR. But if his language was shockingly harsh, the sentiments were typical of the type of passions Rand inspired during her life, and still inspires today. Although she died in 1982, half a million copies of her books still sell each year, and her followers continue to guard her name like hardball lawyers protecting a trademark.

On the other hand, Rand has never been taken seriously by the literary establishment or the academy, earning sneers when she has gotten any attention at all. But if liberals disdained her, many conservatives feared her ferocious atheism and her quixotic defense of capitalism. Whereas traditional conservatives believe that free markets create the most wealth for all, Rand praised capitalism in moral terms: great achievers have a right not to be held back, she grimly argued, her dramatic cape atwirl and her gold dollar brooch shining.

Helping to sort out these competing passions are Jennifer Burns's *Goddess of the Market* and Anne Heller's *Ayn Rand and the World She Made*, two outstanding biographies that re-

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veal much about a figure who to this point has been chronicled only by biased disciples. The books are pleasantly complementary. Burns's is an intellectual biography that situates Rand in the tradition of modern libertarian politics; the writing is focused and concise, and the analysis very sharp. Remarkably, this shrewd, accessible work is a doctoral thesis repackaged. Heller's book is a more traditional life, a detailed portrait that uses a narrower lens, painstakingly but elegantly showing Rand's descent into intellectual madness. Reading the two books together provides for the first time a complete picture of Rand's life and works—and the picture is an ugly one.

Both authors contend that Rand's early years in Russia heavily influenced her intellectual development. She was born Alisa Rosenbaum three weeks after the 1905 revolution, and lived through the 1917 ones and their bloody, impoverished aftermaths. Each author seizes on a different formative experience, and if this type of armchair psychology by biographers is never very reliable, it is in this case certainly plausible. Heller describes an incident in which Rand's mother paternalistically tricked Rand into giving away a favorite toy. Burns, by contrast, opens her book with a harrowing scene in 1918 when a twelve-year-old Rand watched armed Red Guards forcefully take over her father's pharmacy for the greater good of the people. Both incidents taught young Rand that tyrants often profess benevolent motives to justify coercive acts.

Rand's philosophy—developed after emigrating alone at twenty-one to the U.S., scraping by as a screenwriter in Hollywood—was essentially an anti-altruism. She called it Objectivism. No kind gesture on behalf of others should be trusted, because it might disguise nefarious motives. (To Rand, Robin Hood is the ultimate villain.) Selfishness is a virtue; reason, above all, prevails; and emotion is inconsequential. Thus Rand believed taxation was immoral, charity was foolish, and equality a terrible ideal; conscription and anti-abortion laws were unconscionable intrusions into citizens' personal rights. Above all she believed in markets, regulated by little more than courts to enforce contract and property law. Viewing Rand's uncompromising politics in light of her upbringing in the Soviet Union turns her into a type of Clarence Thomas figure: someone who rebels so strongly against injustice experienced during childhood that she creates an extreme perversion of the usual lessons learned. Whereas Thomas reacted to boyhood racism by voting, from his perch on the Supreme Court, to eliminate any law that purported to help blacks or other minorities, Rand took from communism that no one should try to help anyone else, ever.

But as Rand's fame grew during her years as a famous novelist, pop philosopher, and elephant gun for Republican candidates, she tended to ignore the many selfless people who had helped her succeed. There was her family in Russia who sold their jewelry to send her to America; her relatives in Chicago who helped get her to Hollywood; and her many friends whom she soaked for ideas in late-night debates and then disowned irreversibly when they committed heresies like praising Kant or Plato. (Rand preferred Aristotle.) Above all, Heller shows, there was her husband, Frank O'Connor, a patient soul whose idyllic life as a gentleman farmer was uprooted when Rand insisted they move from their ranch in California to New York so that she could pursue her writing. O'Connor pined to return to the ranch for the rest of his life, but Rand, scrubbing the historical record like the communists she so detested, insisted that "he loves New York. He *hated* California."

Rand's greatest cruelty to her ever-loyal husband was to sit him down and explain to him that she would begin carrying on an affair with her intellectual soulmate, Nathaniel Branden. Branden had by that time become the leader of a cult following that surrounded Rand and eventually isolated her from the public in the 1960s and '70s. Ironically for a group devoted to individualism, they denounced wayward thinkers in Stalinish show trials and lined up to copy Rand's most prosaic choices (such as her selection of furniture styles). By Rand's thinking, the affair with Branden was perfectly rational, and emotion needn't enter into the equation. That was little consolation for O'Connor, cuckolded in twice-weekly trysts in his own bed—nor, as it turned out, for Rand herself, when Branden abandoned her for a younger woman. She denounced him completely in the pages of her newsletter, *The Objectivist*, and made her followers swear not to attend his lectures. Burns's book only hints at the full extent of these twisted love triangles and loyalty oaths, while Heller reveals them for the historical record in all their sordid glory.

Burns has the edge, though, in identifying Rand's intellectual legacy. She describes Rand as "the ultimate gateway drug to life on the right," elaborating: "Just as Rand had provided businessmen with a set of ideas that met their need to feel righteous and honorable in their professional lives, she gave young people a philosophical system that met their deep need for order and certainty." Who needs difficult questions, gray areas, and doubt when one can have all of life's questions conclusively answered in 1,000 easy-to-read pages? And who wouldn't want to have every base, selfish motive validated by an unassailable philosophy proving that kindness and altruism are actually bad?

Burns also traces Rand's prickly relationship to the Republican Party: she campaigned for Wendell Willkie in 1940 and Barry Goldwater in 1964 but grew exasperated with the party's growing religiosity and tepid defense of capitalism. She loathed Ronald Reagan. When the Libertarian Party took off in the early 1970s, one might have expected her to get involved, but instead she flashed her property-rights fangs, insisting that its leaders were stealing her ideas.

Ultimately, both books show that Rand's own life disproved her carefully wrought philosophy of selfishness. She happily accepted help from others while denouncing altruistic kindness. She trumpeted the virtue of reason over emotion, then surrendered to jealousy of a former lover. More bizarrely, she proved the preposterousness of absolute self-reliance by setting herself up as psychotherapist to many vulnerable members of her salon, doing untold damage to psyches and relationships. Too many young Ayn Rand followers have relied on her novels alone to prove the value of an individualism so extreme that it does not merely ignore others, but actually spits in their faces. Now that biographers have shown the devastation she brought upon those around her, the lesson is painfully clear: behold the ruins of a completely selfish life. WM

Michael O'Donnell is a writer and lawyer living in Chicago.

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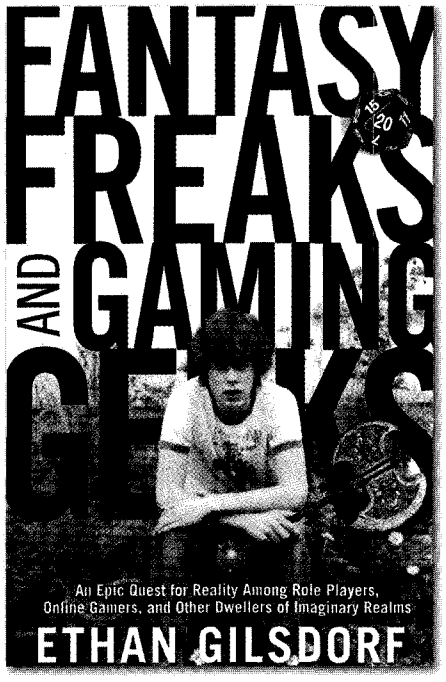
Nerd Nation



Fantasy Freaks and Gaming Geeks: An Epic Quest for Reality Among Role Players, Online Gamers, and Other Dwellers of Imaginary Realms

by Ethan Gilsdorf

The Lyons Press, 336 pp.

The thin line between *World of Warcraft* and Fantasy Football.

By Jesse Singal

When Ethan Gilsdorf was eleven years old, his mother suffered an aneurysm that left her with various cognitive and physical disabilities, along with a much-altered personality. She became the "Momster" and the "Kitchen Dragon" to Gilsdorf and his siblings, and to escape he turned to *Dungeons and Dragons*, a popular role-playing game in which players use oddly shaped dice, their imaginations, and an ever-growing, arcane set of rules to engage in an endless variety of fantasy adventures.

The hobby didn't last past high school. But a few years ago, just north of forty and wondering whether his unmarried, childless state pointed to arrested development of some sort, Gilsdorf—a Boston-based teacher and journalist—decided to reimmerse himself in the fantasy world to figure out why it meant so much to so many, and why he had never been able to fully let it go. The result is *Fantasy Freaks and Gaming Geeks: An Epic Quest for Reality Among Role Players, Online Gamers, and Other Dwellers of Imaginary Realms*, part travelogue, part self-conscious autobiographical character study, and part journalistic examination of the fantasy culture.

Since Gilsdorf hung up his dungeon master's cloak, that culture has changed dramatically, in ways his book both does and doesn't acknowledge. Role-playing computer franchises like *Diablo* and *Ultima Online*, which a decade ago were popular with a much smaller, nerdier subset of the population, have gone online and mainstream. *World of Warcraft*, set in a danger-fraught land called Azeroth, was launched in 2004 and now has more than 11 million monthly subscribers. Diehard fantasy enthusiasts have conventions like Dragon*Con and engage in live-action role playing, or "LARPing"—think of a bunch of people dressing up in the woods and going on Tolkien-esque "quests"—and there is, of course, the *Harry Potter* juggernaut. Billions of dollars trade hands every year on account of people's desire to visit imaginary realms.

In an attempt to better understand all this, Gilsdorf hits the road. His travels take him across the United States, to France and Britain, and to New Zealand. He checks out the former haunts of J. R. R. Tolkien at Oxford, tours some of the sites where the blockbuster *Lord of the Rings* film adaptation trilogy was filmed in New Zealand, and sees a castle being built using only medieval methods in France. Stateside, he hangs out with all manner of fantasy enthusiasts, from LARPers and *D&D* aficionados to online gamers and a *Harry Potter*–themed rock band.

Some of Gilsdorf's profiles of fantasy lovers are quite potent. The most heartbreaking of the lot is Nissa Ludwig, 39, an avid online gamer who suffers from a degenerative muscular condition, and who enjoys inhabiting worlds in which her character can fight otherworldly monsters, swim in crystal-clear rivers, and ascend craggy, treacherous peaks. "I can't run through the grass barefoot anymore," Ludwig tells Gilsdorf. "It's something I cannot do. But my avatar can."

Encounters like this underscore, sometimes emotionally, the escapist element of fantasy—an idea on which Gilsdorf focuses intently, chewing it over in various iterations throughout the book. But while it may be emotionally affecting, it isn't a particularly new or original observation. We know humans are attracted to escapism, and it's been plainly apparent since long before the first awkward teenager tossed

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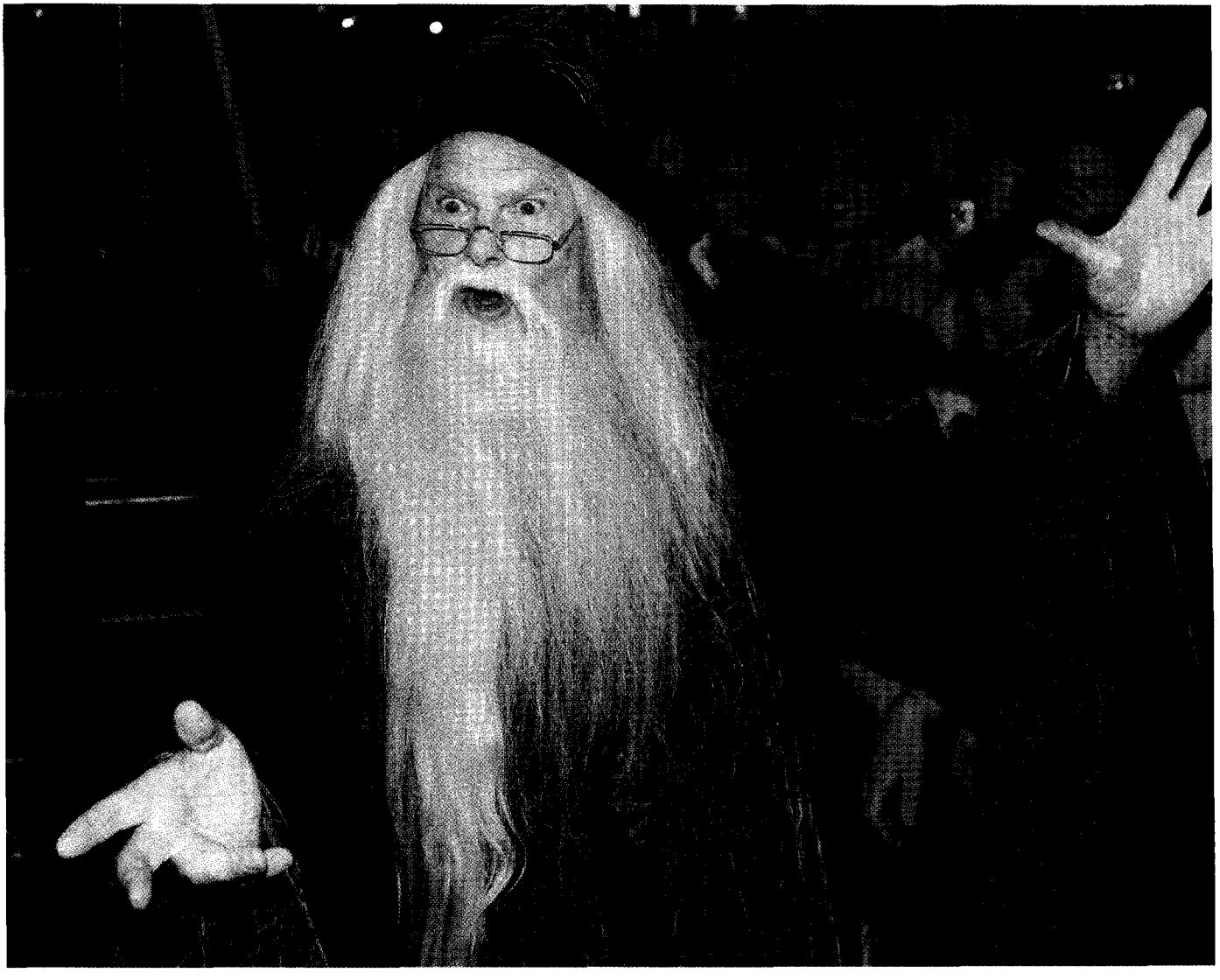
the first twenty-sided die. But there's more at work here—a mere desire for escapism can't explain, say, the extreme popularity of *World of Warcraft*.

The problem stems in part from the fact that Gilsdorf doesn't do a good job sorting out his nerds. He doesn't understand that there is often a big difference between, say, a hard-core LARPer and a casual-to-moderate online gamer; for the former, the activity represents something deeply important, while for the latter it's simply a hobby, not particularly different from the regular diet of *SportsCenter* once a day and a few football or basketball games per week that many sports fans subsist on. Just as you can't fairly compare the casual NFL viewer with the full-blown armchair quarterback who devotes huge chunks of his life to QB ratings and yards-per-attempt calculations, so too is there a difference, and a very important one, between the millions of people who spend a few hours a week on *WoW* and those who are completely obsessed with it. Gilsdorf doesn't account for this difference; he tends instead to sweep fantasy enthusiasts with hugely varying degrees of fandom into the same category, treating them all as something radically new.

Perhaps he resists certain comparisons because he thinks fantasy is fundamentally different from other amusements. "Fantasy entertainment," he writes, "more so than other hobby areas (say, sports, cooking, or academia) attracts ... extreme participation. With no elaborate backstory or creation myth, baseball and football don't have the imaginative narrative possibilities that Harry Potter does." No, they don't; but they do have just as many obsessive adherents. The sprawling connective tendrils of the Internet have allowed all manner of hobbies to become addictions. Cooks blog when they're not cooking; academics stay up until the wee hours arguing on online forums.

In short, obsessives come in every flavor, and Gilsdorf seems to never fully take this into account. Throughout his book he draws a thick black line between Fantasy Enthusiasts and Everyone Else—but that line is fading rapidly in the age of the Internet. WM

Jesse Singal is web editor of the *Washington Monthly*.



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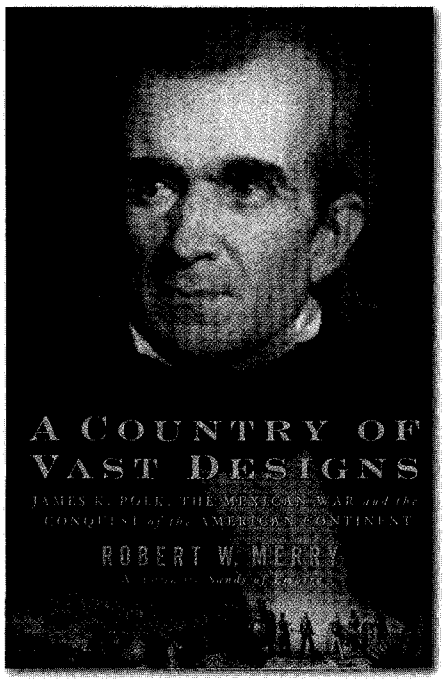
One-Term Wonder



A Country of Vast Designs: James K. Polk, the Mexican War, and the Conquest of the American Continent

by Robert W. Merry
Simon & Schuster, 592 pp.

What Barack Obama can learn from James K. Polk.

By Tim Murphy

Writing for *U.S. News & World Report* last November, columnist James Pethokoukis needed just one week to declare the Obama presidency a bust. If the economy continued its downward trajectory, Pethokoukis wrote, "the 'O' in 'Obama' may stand for 'One Term.'" His pronouncement was a tad premature—the flubbed oath of office was still ten weeks away—but by no means exceptional. Within a week of Bill Clinton's triumph in 1992, analysts darkly warned that his contract would not be renewed if his health care reform failed; and only two days after the Supreme Court effectively sealed the Florida recount in 2000, Thomas F. Eagleton, writing for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, sketched a comparison between George W. Bush and Rutherford B. Hayes—the latter a beneficiary of widescale voter fraud and, more damning for his legacy, a one-term president.

For occupants of the Oval Office, the prospect of a four-and-out brings with it the putrid aroma of failure. Even Cincinnatus, the patron saint of civic virtue, served two full terms as dictator before famously turning in his fasces for a plow. And so, when health care reform, economic woe, and an escalating war in Afghanistan conspired to sink the new president's approval ratings back to par this August, there was a minor kerfuffle when White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs declared that his boss was "quite comfortable" sacrificing a second term if it meant pushing through progressive legislation.

Quite comfortable? Hasn't he ever heard of Jimmy Carter?

Perhaps Gibbs had in mind James K. Polk, the nation's greatest president never to seek reelection and the subject of Robert W. Merry's *A Country of Vast Designs*. Merry, formerly editor in chief of *Congressional Quarterly*, tackles a compelling but largely uncharted era in American history: the flurry of western expansion that bridged the Age of Jackson to the politics of the Civil War. In three grand strokes, Polk transformed the geopolitical outlook of the continent for centuries to come, expanding the nation by a third and solidifying its claim to the Pacific. Polk secured the annexation of Texas, snatched the Oregon Territory from the hated Brits, and went to war with Mexico over the title to California and the Southwest. On the home front, Polk solidified the legacy of his mentor, Andrew Jackson, by slashing a divisive tariff and installing an independent banking system—a reform that would define the landscape until the inception of the Federal Reserve in 1913. He did in one term what few could have done in two.

Polk accomplished all of this in a political climate that could most accurately be described as unhinged, and with a hopelessly small penny jar of political capital. He even managed to turn his lame-duck status into an asset. *Designs* is a thoroughly enjoyable book that illuminates a man and a moment that have been largely glossed over in popular history. Merry offers an inside-the-Beltway narrative of westward expansion, capturing the fierce ideological and sectional differences that gripped the federal government in the 1840s while injecting enough color to bring to life the personalities and fierce ideals of a largely forgotten cast of politicians, diplomats, and commanders.

And he does so without the luxury of a colorful and commanding protagonist. Unlike his ally Andrew Jackson, Polk never fought a duel or wed an already-married wom-

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an. Nor were his ideas timeless: these days candidates talk about Manifest Destiny about as often as they talk about the temperance movement. There's little inherently interesting about Polk beyond the riddle of why someone who did so much could be so little remembered, and the question of how he did it.

Merry depicts the eleventh president as an introvert whose standard response to crisis was to scribble away in his diary. Polk was not in any sense charismatic—even his marriage to his devoted wife, Sarah, came about not through individual initiative, we learn, but after explicit prodding from Jackson. His oratory was forceful but unspectacular, an eminently perishable brand of populism that stands little chance of ever gracing a marble monument. "He was in many ways a smaller-than-life figure," Merry writes, who "harbored larger-than-life ambitions." What separated Polk from the generally defective presidents of his era was an uncommon perseverance, an approach to governing made possible by a concession that lent structure and urgency to his agenda.

Polk's decision to serve just one term was rooted on neither principle nor actuarial tables (although he died less than four months after his term ended). Instead, it came about as a campaign promise meant to win the support of his party's deep bench of aspiring candidates, whose feuds positioned the dark-horse candidate Polk for the nomination but who threatened to withhold their support unless he pledged not to run again.

For everyone but the man in the Oval Office, the self-imposed term limit had the exact impact you might expect: Polk's advisers, diplomats, and commanders behaved toward their lame-duck leader in much the same way a class of rowdy students might treat their substitute algebra teacher. His two leading generals in the Mexican War, the boorish Zachary Taylor (whose mental aptitude Polk frequently questioned) and the vainglorious Winfield "Old Fuss and Feathers" Scott, sought to pave their own paths to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue by publicly and privately undermining the commander in chief. A third officer, Captain John C. Frémont, somehow spun a cartographic mission to California into a bizarre—and totally illegal—war of conquest that briefly turned the Mexican territory into an independent state named the Bear Flag Republic. And then there was Polk's perpetually petulant secretary of state, James Buchanan, who comes off in Merry's account as some sort of cross between Henry Kissinger and the little boy from *The Omen*, a backstabbing statesman whom Polk, against his better judgment, stuck with to the end.

At the time of Polk's inauguration, the Oregon territory was held jointly by the U.S. and Great Britain under terms of an earlier agreement. Ever the diplomat, Polk informed the British that the U.S. held legitimate title to the entire territory, but he'd be willing to compromise along the 49th parallel (the present-day boundary). When they refused, he changed course dramatically, demanding all of the contested lands up to the southern tip of Alaska and, just to show the British he was serious, threatening to go to war unless a new deal was brokered. He egged on Congress's most ardent expansionists while leaving his own plans ambiguous, pushing the debate far enough toward the fringe that the eventual compromise treaty, larded with British concessions, looked moderate by comparison.

If Polk's Oregon strategy amounted to a high-stakes game of chicken, his acquisition of the Southwest was a bit more complicated, owing to the fact that the U.S. had no legitimate claim to the land, and it wasn't for sale. These would normally be considered deal breakers, but Polk figured that if he could somehow provoke Mexico into firing the first shot he could then justify a more expansive military approach, occupy the territories he wanted to obtain, and force a relatively quick concession. It wasn't a war of conquest, he argued; the U.S. was just defending itself from an aggressor and taking a little something (525,000 square miles) for the inconvenience. The war engendered fierce opposition at every turn, but Polk never wavered on his goal.

Merry emphasizes that what set Polk apart from his contemporaries—in fact, the only thing that set him apart from everyone else—was his dogged persistence in pushing through his agenda. He conducted foreign policy with the audacity, perhaps recklessness, of someone with nothing to lose.

Had Polk pined for a renewal on his White House lease, it's reasonable to assume he'd have taken a more tactful approach to governance, one that steered clear of potential intraparty conflicts and sectional spats. He might have settled for less than the 49th parallel as his northern border and San Diego harbor as his southern one, or perhaps he'd have simply acquired Texas and called it a day. Instead, he played to a different set of calculations than did his political rivals.

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Merry captures this most clearly not in his description of Polk, but through the machinations of Buchanan, who in many ways served as a perfect foil for his boss—dead set on political advancement with little regard for principle. To Polk's constant dismay, Buchanan reversed his position on nearly every major question before him with little warning or stated rationale. His gaze fixated on his own future, Buchanan was, unlike Polk, a prisoner of Washington's fickle political winds.

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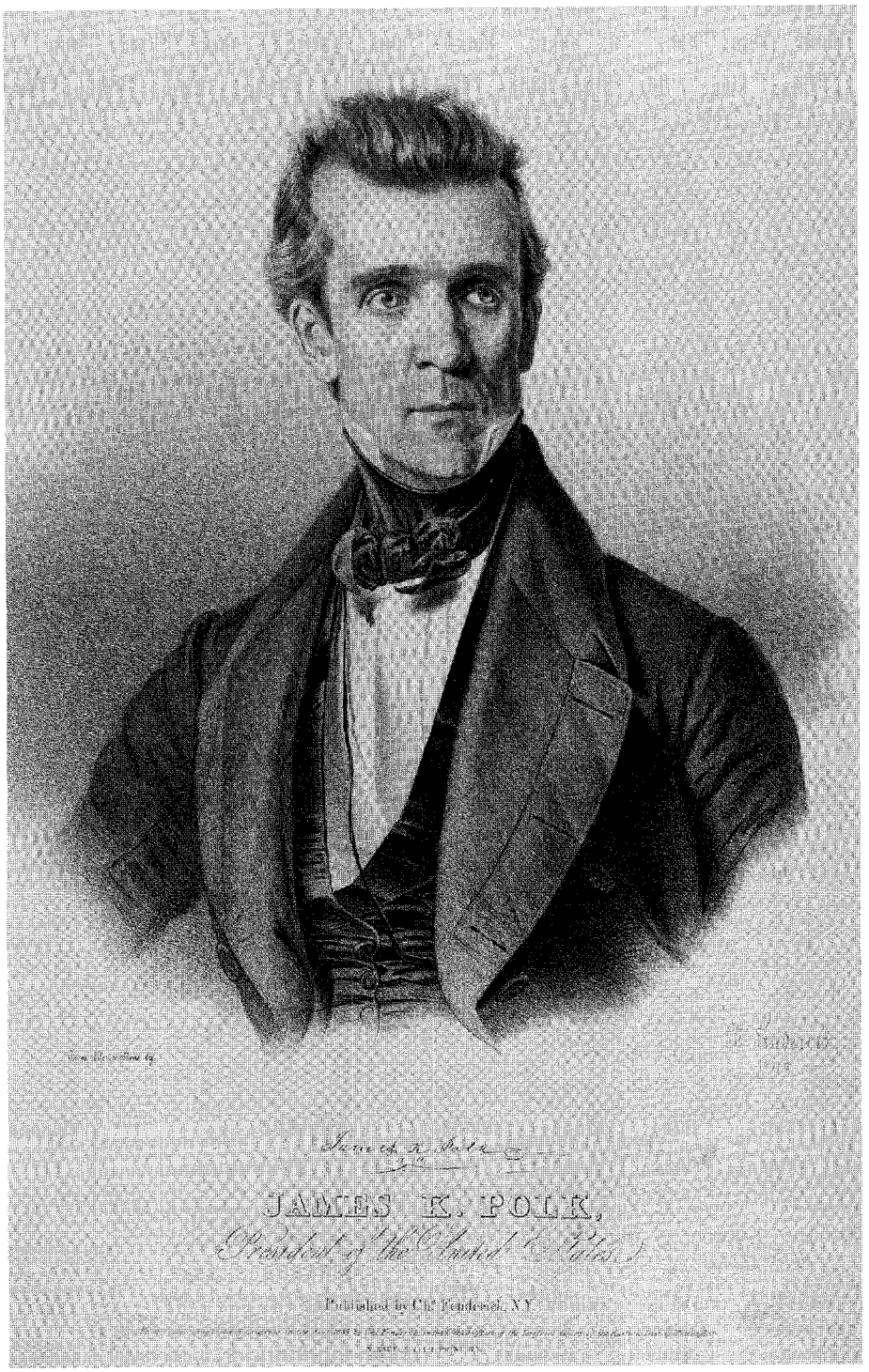
A one-term limit is by no means a guarantee of presidential boldness or success; the only other chief executive seemed quite comfortable taking bold positions despite harboring reelection hopes. But Jackson enjoyed something



President James K. Polk, 1845.

to enter office with a promise similar to Polk's was Rutherford B. Hayes, one of our worst presidents ever. Jackson and Abraham Lincoln, meanwhile, both close to a cult of personality among his supporters, and Lincoln had the mixed blessing of losing the eleven states that most opposed his policies. Polk's antebellum America, as the failings of his successors demonstrated, was an impossible climate in which presidential inaction was compulsory but never satisfactory. By taking his name out of consideration for a second term, Polk lost any incentive to hold back on his ambitions and created a window of opportunity that allowed him to push through his own agenda. It took a considerable level of political skill to make it work, but the lame-duck status was arguably the critical variable that spared Polk from the paralysis that gripped his inept successors.

Merry never makes this connection explicitly, though, and therein lies the book's biggest shortcoming: we are left to marvel at Polk's "martyrdom of duty," as the author puts it, with little explanation as to where it came from. The lame-duck imperative is hardly mentioned; Merry instead uses the term limit to depict the president as sort of a male bumblebee, who accomplished everything he was put on earth to do and then almost immediately bit the dust. "Polk brought to his presidency imperatives of boldness, persistence, force of will, and guile that went beyond anything anyone had ever before seen in him," Merry concludes, and leaves it at that. And while we're frequently told that Polk turned to his diary for consultation, those words rarely make it into the book. This book isn't, in short, *John Adams*. We're left to intuit the larger forces that shaped Polk's presidency.

But Polk succeeded in a unique fashion no one else has replicated. It took a president who didn't care about the electoral consequences to transform the nation as Young Hickory managed to do. Today's lame ducks are perhaps unfairly caricaturized, as Sarah Palin so gracefully articulated, as "unproductive, typical, politics-as-usual" doormats. Merry's book offers a fresh perspective, and a glimpse of how things can work out differently. A four-and-out might not be Obama's worst nightmare—and it shouldn't be. WM

Tim Murphy is an intern at the *Washington Monthly*.

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